

1

[New Life+]

Young Again in Another World

Mine
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The heat, the weight, and the softness all congealed into a wave of sensation that threatened to relieve Renya of his wits.

"I'M SURE
WE BOTH
KNOW WHAT
THIS MEANS,
SO... SHALL
WE BEGIN?"

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue: I Lived Long and Prospered, or So It Was Told](#)

[Interlude: The First One, or So It Was Told](#)

[Chapter 1: There Was Trouble on the Double, or So It Was Told](#)

[Interlude: The Second One, or So It Was Told](#)

[Chapter 2: A Storm Was Coming, or So It Was Told](#)

[Chapter 3: The Battle Ended and It Was Clean-Up Time, or So It Was Told](#)

[Chapter 4: They Were Finally in Town, or So It Was Told](#)

[Interlude: The Third One, or So It Was Told](#)

[Chapter 5: From Reports to Invitations, or So It Was Told](#)

[Epilogue: A Party Was Formed, or So It Was Told](#)

[Chapter 0: On a Certain Day, in a Certain Time, at a Certain Place, or So It Was Told](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus In-Store Exclusives](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue: I Lived Long and Prospered, or So It Was Told

“Doo-do-do-doo! Congratulations! You’ve been granted the privilege of being reincarnated in another world! This is an extremely rare opportunity. So rare, in fact, that it’s like winning the lottery! That’s right, you just hit the jackpot! Are you happy? You must be happy! All right, I’ve decided that you’re happy, so let’s get this show on the road! Party poppers, at the ready!”

“Huh?”

The young girl appeared out of nowhere. She had blond hair and wore a simple tunic. Her excessively upbeat entrance was accompanied by the equally sudden appearance of a massive crowd of similarly blond-haired, tunic-donning ladies that stretched for as far as the eye could see. Spreading from each of their backs was a pair of white wings. In their hands, they each held a gadget that resembled a slightly larger version of those confetti poppers used at parties. They also seemed to share the same look of discontent. Nevertheless, moving in perfect unison, the endless ranks of ladies all brought their poppers before their chests.

“Fire!”

At the young girl’s command, they pulled the cords. An uncountably vast number of party poppers roared all at once, creating a deafening rumble that shook the very ground they stood on. The overwhelming display sent Renya Kunugi reeling and he fell on his behind.

“Discard poppers! Band members, take out your instruments! Clappers and chorus members, at the ready!”

Despite the deep scowls on the ladies' faces, the young girl continued to issue orders with undiminished enthusiasm. Half of the countless winged blondes brought out various musical instruments from nowhere in particular and readied them. Half of the remaining ladies got ready to clap, while the other half clasped their hands before their chest and prepared to sing. Alarms went off inside Renya's head.

This is not good...

The poppers that had just gone off were loud enough. This time, it was an orchestra, complete with chorus and clapping. If they all sounded at once, ruptured eardrums would be the least of Renya's concerns; it might just blow the sanity straight out of his head. Therefore, he decided that he had to do something to stop that from happening, and he had to do it *now*.

"A Song of Celebration, on my mark! Ready... and... GAH!"

From his position on the ground, Renya shot to his feet and dashed toward the orchestra's conductor. Without the slightest hint of mercy or hesitation, he took aim at the cheerful young girl who seemed to be having the time of her life and threw all his weight behind a front kick. The girl, not expecting to be attacked, took his kick right in the face and was forced to perform an elaborate sequence of backflips through the air.

Then, hindsight struck. It occurred to Renya that the countless ladies who surrounded him on all sides were obeying the girl's orders. In other words, it could be said that the girl was their commander, and they were her troops. Surely, they would not stand idly by after he just attacked their commander. He looked around him, but found that not a single one of them budged. He wondered if these were perhaps the kind of people who could not move unless ordered to, but soon dismissed the idea after seeing a number of them grin and give him the thumbs up. Some

even quietly waved their hands at him. The ladies were, apparently, very reluctant followers.

“Wh-What was that for?!”

The girl, who was sprawled on the ground after her tumble, got up on her feet and loudly protested her treatment. During her previously supine position, her clothes had been left in a state of significant disarray. Her choice of dress — a tunic — meant that a number of things, none of which were publicly decent, had been in full view from where Renya stood. He was, however, in no mood to mention that.

“To shut you up! Your party poppers were already loud enough! What did you think was going to happen if you got this many people to sing and play all at the same time? Are you trying to blow out my eardrums?!”

“So you decided to kick a little girl in the face?!”

“I’m against age discrimination!”

“But I’m a girl!”

“Gender equality, then!”

Renya thrust his chest out confidently, which precipitated a round of hushed murmurs and the odd bout of applause.

“Did I just hear applause?!” cried the girl incredulously. She glared angrily at the mob of ladies. As if on cue, they all averted their gazes in a distinctly “wasn’t me” fashion. Squaring her shoulders, the young girl turned to face Renya, who was watching their back-and-forth with a baffled look.

“Ugh... Maybe I picked the wrong person,” said the girl.

“What are you talking about? And where is this place, even?” asked Renya as he looked around. There was nothing but winged people as far as he could see. Turning his gaze upward, he found not a blue sky, but rather an empty space glowing faintly of white light that stretched endlessly into the distance.

“This is the land of God!” announced the girl proudly as she puffed out her poorly-endowed chest.

“Uh huh,” replied Renya flatly.

“Renya Kunugi, you have passed away!”

“Sure.”

“And what a way to go! At the age of 94, you have truly lived long and prospered! Great job with the whole dying peacefully thing and all! Nothing beats good health and wellbeing, does it?”

Despite the certainty of her tone, Renya did not believe a word of what she said. If she was telling the truth, that would mean he had already lived through a whole 94 years of life, and at the end of which had died not through accident or disease, but purely of old age. He had absolutely no recollection of this.

“Of course, it’s a pain to deal with wrinkly old grandpas, so I just reinitialized all your settings in that regard and set your mental state to around eighteen years old.”

In a most casual manner, the girl proceeded to divulge more details. Renya felt a flash of anger at what he heard.

“Hey, you...”

“I mean, you could argue there’s some “gap moe” trope about a loli-shota-looking kid who talks like an old geezer, but honestly, it’s just plain creepy. Like, seriously, just stop daydreaming about loli grandmas and shota grandpas.”

“Hey, cut it out!”

Realizing that it would be a bad idea to let the girl ramble on, Renya tried to cut her off. However, the girl paid him no mind.

“But I digress. Let us leave the topic of niche fetishes in the proverbial trash can for now.”

“Then why’d you even bring it up in the first place?”

Renya’s quip fell on deaf ears.

“All right, back on topic. As I was saying, you have been granted the privilege of being reincarnated in another world.”

“No thanks.”

The girl had barely finished speaking before Renya butted in with his answer. The girl froze, seemingly at a loss for

words. Paying her no heed, Renya continued.

“I’m not really interested. It also sounds like a lot of trouble. Plus, it’s so obvious that all these over-the-top theatrical shenanigans are smoke and mirrors and you’re trying to hide something.”

“I-I have not the slightest idea what you’re talking about!”

With the girl clearly flustered, as evidenced by her wavering voice and shifty eyes, Renya went in for the finishing blow.

“You told me I lived long and prospered, right? In that case, I clearly died with no regrets. I guess I can’t say for sure since I don’t remember, but I assume all that’s left is getting shipped off to either Heaven or Hell and having all my memories erased, right? I’d rather not go to Hell, though.”

“Th-That’s right! If you say no, then you’ll get sent to Hell!” said the girl with the most obvious I-came-up-with-that-just-now look on her face.

“What am I guilty of, then?” asked Renya.

“Guilty of?! U-Um, well, you know... Uh, murder! That’s right! You’re guilty of murder!”

“That’s strange. I seem to recall being told I passed away peacefully after a nice, long life. Did I die without ever being caught for my crime?”

The girl’s expression stiffened. Her cheeks trembled a little.

“Um... You died in prison!”

“Wow, I must have committed a crime pretty late in life, then. Or maybe I killed a whole lot of people? Still, to think that I just sat in prison until I finally got too old and croaked... Must have been quite the body count in the end. How many was it?”

“Erm... O-Oh, it’s that! Um, you know! All men sustain their own lives by taking the lives of other creatures! In other words, you have sinned!”

"So, you're telling me there is no Heaven? That the whole world is but Hell eternal? Man, religious people are going to lose their minds."

"W-Well, there's always vegetarianism..."

"Ah, I take it you're one of those people who think the concept of 'life' doesn't apply to plants, then? Or perhaps you believe some lives are worth more than others? Whales are smart, so it's wrong to eat them, but cows and pigs are A-okay. A dolphin can be your friend, but never a chicken. Is that the kind of person you are?"

Even as Renya rattled off question after question, he knew that his verbal offensive was on shaky ground. While it seemed like he had the momentum, he realized that if his opponent truly had any intention of retaliating, she could easily just ignore his rambling and force the issue. To someone like her, the value of a life probably rounded to zero.

"I'm so sorry. If you'll give me a chance to apologize, I'll start over and explain properly, so please listen to what I have to say."

If the girl was aware of Renya's concerns, she did not show it, because she proceeded to drop to her knees and humbly prostrate herself before him. There was another stir in the crowd, more noticeable than before, followed by a round of applause.

"Damn it, people! Why do you always clap whenever something bad happens to me?!"

Leaping to her feet, she glowered at the ladies surrounding her, but found no one willing to meet her gaze. With her teeth bared, she continued to throw menacing glances at her followers until Renya got her attention with a quick cough.

"I'll listen," said Renya, "provided that you give me a proper explanation. Whether or not I actually go along with your plan, though, is still up in the air."

"Hnnngh, fine. Firstly, I am that which you people refer to

as God. The concept, the being, whatever. It's me. Next would be these perverted ladies standing all around you. They're what you would normally call 'angels.' They're perverts, by the way. Did I mention that? Yes? Good."

Her comment prompted a round of booing. She silenced it with a glare.

"You *are* all perverts! Are you gonna try to deny it? Who went around making babies with humans? Whose yuri exploits got so out of hand that they actually tried out a virgin birth? Who was it, huh?"

In response, a number of ladies put on innocent expressions and looked off in some other direction.

"I swear, the only thing you people are good for is complaining..." grumbled the girl.

"Whatever. Keep explaining," said Renya.

"Huh? No quip? No witty jab at me?" asked the girl in surprise.

"Nah. How you introduce yourself is your choice, after all. You're God, right? So, which god? The Jesus one? The Buddha one? Or the eye for an eye one?"

"Please. Don't liken me to their lot. They're the result of people's overactive imaginations," said the girl with an irritated grimace. "I, on the other hand, am simply me. No more, no less. I created all, I guide all, and I rule over all."

"Wow, I think I'm about to pass out from amazement. So, why'd the creator of all things decide to grace Random Creation A with her godly presence?"

Renya's sarcastic tone did not go unnoticed, earning him a scowl from the girl.

"You don't believe me, do you? Fine, whatever. To answer your question though, I do of course have a very good reason for appearing before you. You see, I have a favor to ask of you."

"What's that got to do with being reincarnated into another world?"

In a complete attitude reversal, the girl looked up at

Renya with an almost jarringly meek expression and said, "Actually, that *is* my favor. You see, there's a particular world I'd like you to go to."

"And why exactly does it have to be me?" asked Renya. It was, in his opinion, the obvious follow-up question. Reasons were important, after all. It wasn't like he was the protagonist of one of those cheesy "you are the chosen one" scenarios.

"Because you are the chosen one!"

"All right, that's it."

"I lied. I'm so sorry. Please don't hit me."

Seeing Renya's dark glare and the threatening gesture he made with his fist, the girl immediately backtracked and began apologizing profusely, lowering her head again and again. This was met with another round of applause from the crowd.

"Damn it, what is it with you people? Do you have a problem with me or something?" screamed the girl at her onlookers, the majority of whom nodded deeply in affirmation.

They did, Renya figured, have a problem with her. In fact, judging by their reactions, it seemed like they had built up a fairly sizeable repository of such problems. The sight caused the girl to fall to her knees, her expression defeated.

"Okay, just... just go away please. I can't handle you people anymore. I'll explain the rest myself. It'll be faster that way. And it might let me keep a little bit of my sanity."

Slightly surprised by how little it took to make God herself throw in the towel, Renya watched the ladies around him wave and smile at him. Slowly, they disappeared without a trace. It was a peculiar sight — one that made him question whether or not this was even reality. After all, having people literally vanish into thin air before one's eyes tended to make them doubt such things. Just then, he noticed a row of words appearing out of the corner of his eye.

□ Notification: You gained the blessing of the

angels. □

Renya raised an eyebrow, wondering what the message meant. However, seeing that the girl had somehow managed to get back on her feet, he redirected his attention towards her.

“Okay, so, uh,” said the girl. “What I said wasn’t entirely a lie. I mean, the part about being the chosen one was, but the rest of it was sort of true. You can’t just pick some random person off the street, hurl them across the boundary of a world, and expect them to continue to exist in the new one. It doesn’t work like that.”

“In other words, I happen to be someone who can withstand crossing that boundary?”

“That’s right. Other conditions included being reasonably well-built, in good health, ideologically sound without any deviant beliefs, and free of any lingering regrets in the original world. You happened to meet all my criteria.”

Renya considered pointing out that “lived long and prospered” and “lingering regrets” were fundamentally contradictory, but ultimately decided to keep quiet.

“Are you sure I’m ideologically okay?” asked Renya. He was about to mention how he just sent God flying with a kick, but the girl stopped him with a shake of her head.

“While I certainly didn’t anticipate you jamming your foot into my face, it’s not really a problem either. There’s no shortage of atheists out there, and the fact that I look like a little girl didn’t seem to arouse you in any way when you kicked me. Plus, it’s not a bad thing to support gender equality.”

“For future reference, you mind telling me what kind of beliefs are not okay?”

“In short, rape, pillage, and burn, I suppose,” said the girl, who proceeded to laugh in a stereotypical villain-like fashion. Had she spiked her hair and painted her face white, it would have been a pretty good impression of a certain musician who claimed to be a demon.

"So, what exactly do you want me to do after I cross over into the other world?"

"Huh? Nothing, really," said the girl with a blank look.

Renya drove his fist into her head. There was a dull thud. She wordlessly crumpled into a squat with her hands covering the point of impact.

"Dead people aren't your toys. Don't bother us for no good reason."

"Judging from your tone, you seem to have come to terms with being dead surprisingly quickly."

"I'd been alive for almost a century. That's plenty. I don't remember a damn thing about it, but if I had to guess, I'd say I had enough."

"I admit that it's pretty harsh to ask someone who just got done with the whole thing to embark on another journey of life, but please bear with me. There's a favor I'd like to ask of you."

"Didn't you just say there was nothing for me to do?" demanded Renya.

From her hunched position on the ground, the girl looked up and was just about to nod when she noticed Renya's tightly-curled fist. She shuffled backward a few steps before continuing.

"I don't need you to do anything once you're there, but I do need you to go! The point is in getting you across, okay? Good? Please don't hit me."

"I demand an explanation."

"The reason is that the world I'm trying to get you to go to has a Resource deficiency."

The girl's terse explanation went straight over Renya's head, but he gave her a look that urged her to keep talking.

"There's not much else to say about the reason. I mean, that's all there is to it... Uh, let's see here," murmured the girl. She scrunched up her face into a frown, as though contemplating something. Then, she threw her arms outwards. As if on cue, a semi-transparent window opened

up right in front of Renya's eyes. He stared at it in surprise. The girl quickly flicked her hand, and the window then displayed a map.

Renya was certain he had never seen a map like it before. He did not know the scale, so there was no way for him to tell how big anything was, but the landmass he saw was roughly in the shape of a four-leaved clover. Each of the leaves were positioned neatly in the cardinal directions.

"So can I assume that the top is north?"

"No worries. This map was drawn with the common knowledge of your world in mind, so you can safely assume the top of the map is north."

"I see. I don't think I've ever seen somewhere that looked like this on a map. What is this place?"

"The people who live there refer this land as the Eldorean continent. It's the only landmass in this world that I want you to live in. To give you some sense of scale... you see how it's shaped like a four-leaved clover? Assume one of those leaves is more or less the size of Eurasia."

"Wait, what?"

Renya did a double take and looked at the map more seriously. Assuming the girl was telling the truth, this continent must be gigantic. It would have a horizontal distance the equivalent of two Eurasias put side by side.

"That's insane!"

"Well, them's the facts, so take it or leave it, I guess."

"How big is the planet, then?! With a continent that big, it could probably fit a bunch of Earths inside!"

"Oh, it's not a planet."

"What?"

The girl opened a separate window and showed it to Renya. Displayed in vivid colors was a blanket of mist and a colossal waterfall the size of which dwarfed anything he had ever seen.

"Do you see it?" asked the girl. "So, how things work in this world is that all of the water and land — the world itself,

essentially — sits on top of a big round tub and all along its edge are waterfalls, past which is a deep plunge into nothingness.”

The girl finished up her explanation with a perfectly serious expression. For five whole minutes, Renya remained speechless. Then, after the bewilderment wore off, he yelled:

“Are you *freaking* kidding me?! How backward do you have to be to believe that about the world? That’s from, like, the Dark Ages!”

“Such a belief would certainly be primitive on Earth. Not to mention entirely wrong. In this world, however, it’s reality. So, if you kept going in the same direction, you wouldn’t eventually end up where you started. You’d just fall off the edge into oblivion.”

“Is the one who created this world stupid or something?” muttered Renya. It was his honest opinion. The girl, however, protested loudly.

“Who’re you calling stupid? I’m standing right here, you know? Me! God! Don’t call me stupid!”

“You *are* stupid! Look at the ocean and how it’s literally falling off the edge of the world! How’s all that water getting replenished?!”

“From the streams and rivers that flow across the continent, obviously!”

“How the crap does the water cycle work, then?! Does it even exist?!”

“What do you think, dumbass? Of course not! You think everyone goes around recycling their planet’s water like you?”

“Isn’t that why there’s a Resource deficiency, then? Because of this shoddy system you’ve got going?” asked Renya. Being called a dumbass by the girl caused his temper to flare, but he managed to catch himself before resorting to more violent forms of retaliation. He could have shut her up with a good smack to the noggin, but somehow, that felt like admitting defeat. Instead, he opted for a

pointed remark. The girl visibly paled.





"Since the water isn't being recycled," continued Renya, "you must be wasting energy somewhere to create more water, right? I mean, just look at how much water is pouring over the side. Even if some of it evaporated and floated back to land, you still have to replace it sooner or later. Otherwise, wouldn't this whole world just shrivel up?"

"Th-Th-That's... That's totally not true. Nope. No siree..."

"Hey, kid, look at me when you talk."

"I-I mean it! Seriously! That's really not it! I'll admit that it's wasting some energy, but that's got nothing to do with the problem at hand! I swear to God!"

Aren't you God, damn it?

Renya forced down the urge to take a swipe at the girl. In return, he continued to glare coldly at her. Her gaze darted left and right, trying desperately not to make eye contact.

"Well?"

"Moving on with the explanation. As you can see, the Eldorean continent is divided into five sections," said the girl, who pretended to not hear Renya and changed the topic. He could have forced the issue, but saw no benefit in interrogating her any further, so he went along with the act.

"North, south, east, west... and the center, huh?"

"That's right. To the east are the humans, and west are the elves. North and south are occupied by the mixed races and the dragons, respectively."

"And the center?"

"The demons."

As the girl spoke, the map changed to display the continent in five different colors.

"Okay, so, I'll spare you the details, but basically, life is pretty harsh in this world. It's not an easy environment for anyone to survive in. In fact, they're fighting wars all over the place," said the girl, a sense of exasperation seeping into her tone. Renya proceeded to ask the obvious question.

"And why exactly is it like that?"

"Probably because the people living there haven't

realized what's going on yet. There are five Administrators in this world, and to kill time, they're fighting turf wars—”

“Make! Them! Stop!”

“Ack, wait, not the throat! Stop strangling me! And you’re not even going for my windpipe! What’s with this pinpoint focus on my carotids?! Stop it! I’m gonna pass out!”

After desperately struggling against the hand grasping her throat, the girl broke free and rushed to distance herself from Renya, who had no intention of letting her go. With a slow but menacing pace — the kind that suggested if he did not like her answer, he might just skip the strangling entirely and break her neck — he advanced toward her. Renya figured that there was a big difference between the two, as the former involved asphyxiation, whereas the latter was a traumatic and fatal spinal injury.

“As if! You think I’ll just watch while you people fight wars for fun?”

“I completely understand why you’re upset, but I also can’t do a thing about it!” shouted the girl as she backed away step by step. Her expression, however, was desperately earnest.

“Aren’t you supposed to be God?”

“I handed off my administrative privilege. I can take it back by force, but there’ll be severe consequences for the world. Specifically...” The girl took a break from fleeing and, her hands still placed defensively around her neck, paused to think. “If you’re okay with sinking eighty percent of the continent, then I can fix this right now.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Too bad, then. In that case, there’s nothing I can do. Unless, of course, the Administrators decide to give me back my administrative privileges,” said the girl.

Hearing the tone of finality in her voice, Renya stopped chasing her around.

“And that would be why,” she continued, “the reincarnation system is breaking down in this world.”

“What do you mean?”

After taking a moment to confirm that Renya had indeed stopped moving, the girl turned to face him and continued her explanation.

“It’s not much of a problem for the souls that died of disease or old age, but consider a battlefield. Being killed normally there might still be okay, but what about the ones who were cut to shreds? Or got munched on by a dragon? Or had their homes raided by a bunch of orcs or goblins or bandits who indulged in various eighteen-plus activities at their expense and took multiple thrusts down there before taking a final sharp one up here? Do you think those souls would want to go back to the same environment?”

“That’s definitely not happening.”

“Right? That’s why there’s been an increase in the number of souls who refuse to go back to their original world.”

There was an air of profound fatigue about the girl. It made even Renya feel a little sorry for her, and he was the one trying to strangle her a few moments ago.

“I’ve tried persuading the Administrators, you know? And tempting the souls who refused with a nice benefits package if they changed their mind. I’ve tried all sorts of things, but the lack of results is pretty frustrating.”

“Huh. So you have been trying.”

“I sure have. But without any results to show for it, there’s not much I can say if the denizens of this world decide to blame me. Even if they tried to strangle me, I’d have no choice but to just take it.”

It occurred to Renya that since he lived in a different world, it was okay for her to resist his attempt to strangle her. Nodding to himself in comprehension, he motioned for her to continue.

“So, thanks to the increase in souls who either transmigrated to a different world or just decided to fold and retire from reincarnation, this world is facing an imminent

Resource deficiency.”

“Is there even any point to saving a world like this? Why not just let it implode?” asked Renya, who considered his proposal quite reasonable. In an environment where Administrators weren’t even bothering to do their jobs properly and the population just kept dropping, decline leading to destruction seemed inevitable. The girl, however, shook her head.

“The thought had crossed my mind, but after considering how many lives would be lost in the process, I decided I couldn’t just throw the baby out with the bathwater,” she replied. After that, she muttered something about remaking and angels and everyone dying from overwork.

“What about moving everyone to a different world?”

“I lack the capacity. First of all, most souls aren’t even aware that they get reincarnated. There are only a small number of souls who reach a high enough level to even refuse.”

Normally, souls who had reached a certain degree of quality would consume some amount of a world’s Resources and be reincarnated in the same world. That was how a world maintained its total Resources. When they opted to transmigrate to a different world, the Resources consumed in that process would not be restored in the original world, causing the total amount to continuously fall. Furthermore, the average souls would never know any of this and had no choice but to keep walking down this path that would gradually lead to their destruction.

“Well, that’s a real downer of a story,” said Renya.

“Tell me about it,” replied the girl. “I’d love to be able to convince the Administrators to get their act together and point this world toward a better direction, but that’s going to take time, as well. That’s why I need your help.”

“So, you want me to go to this world carrying a bunch of Resources and buy you some time.”

“If I could send the Resources through by themselves, I’d

have done it already, but it's sort of like how you can't send an attachment without the email. Currently, I can't move any Resources over without attaching it to someone's soul."

"Isn't there something like a file sharing program?"

"That would be worth making if there's someone on the receiving end. Unfortunately, the Administrators don't seem realize this is happening, so they're stopping me from interfering..."

In other words, she could send the file, but there was no point if nobody was there to receive it. The thought brought a wry smile to the girl's face. According to her, if the Administrators realized their own world was on the verge of destruction, they might change their stance. However, since they were not aware, they saw her requests as nothing more than unnecessary meddling.

"Did you try to explain the situation to them?"

"They told me it was nonsense and refused to hear another word."

"This is clearly a case of choosing the wrong people for the job."

"You're absolutely right. I have no one to blame but myself."

Renya watched as the girl hung her head. He sighed. If he didn't know, he wouldn't have cared, but now that he did know, it felt a little wrong to play the "not my problem" card. Despite his desire to avoid being burdened with a load of trouble, he made up his mind.

"All right. I'll help you."

"I'm terribly sorry for dragging you into this mess, but I'm glad you said yes. Please accept my sincerest gratitude, Renya," the girl said with a deep bow. In the back of his mind, Renya noted that it was times like these when he really wished she did not have the appearance of a young girl. He wasn't doing anything inappropriate, but having a young girl lower her head at him like that made him feel like he was.

"Okay, enough with the bowing already. You can get up," urged Renya, whose voice sounded just a little flustered. He figured, however, that this was inevitable. In response, the girl bowed even more deeply before slowly getting back up.

"My deepest apologies for the trouble, but thank you. If you said no, I would have had to look for another suitable candidate," said the girl, then she added, "Which would have been such a pain..."

This piqued Renya's curiosity.

"By the way, what are the chances of finding a suitable candidate?"

"One in five billion six hundred and thirty million."

Renya let out another sigh at the number. Statistically, that meant there was only one person on Earth who fit the bill. It was, he thought, quite the stroke of misfortune for him.

"So, how exactly is it going to work when you send me to this world? I assume I won't have to start over from being born, right?" He made sure to emphasize the latter part of his sentence. While it was an odd worry considering all his memories were gone, he still felt some resistance at reliving his life from the toddler years. In fact, if he had to do the whole baby thing with his current mental faculties intact, he might actually die from embarrassment.

"If I tried to drop you into the reincarnation system, they might use their administrative privileges to bounce you back, so I'll be using my power to force you into the world. That means you won't be getting reborn. I'll have it set so that if you die over there, you'll automatically come back here. Once that happens, I'll honor your wishes for your next reincarnation. You'll be free to choose for yourself."

Knowing that he would not have to remain indefinitely at his destination was a relief for Renya. After all, it didn't sound like a world he would enjoy a long stay in.

"As for issues with family registers and your identity and such, if anyone asks, just tell them you're a Wanderer. It'll

make sense to them.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“There are actually a fair number of people in this world who drifted in from other worlds. The world itself is unstable, so it’s not uncommon to see rifts to other worlds pop open randomly from time to time.”

“So much for the conditions. Didn’t you have to meet a bunch of them before crossing a boundary?”

“One’s crossing a boundary and the other’s falling down a hole. They’re not the same,” replied the girl. The window she was showing Renya disappeared after she flicked at it with her finger. Then, she opened up a different window.

“Now, then. Once I send you over, I’ll need you to live there for a couple of decades. To prepare you for this endeavor, I, *God*, shall bestow upon you my blessing.”

The way she emphasized the word “God” made Renya clap his hands together, as though suddenly remembering something.

“Oh, right. Now that you mention it, you’re God, aren’t you?”

“Yes-I-am! And don’t you forget it! That’s the most important part!”

“Well, you can’t blame me, can you? I mean, look at yourself. You’re like the least God-looking thing around.”

The girl pouted in response. Seeing the sullen look on her face, Renya became slightly worried that he said something he should not have.

“So much for appealing to your instincts to protect the weak. That was the whole reason I went with the look-I’m-a-delicate-snowflake appearance, too...”

“Seriously? This is all calculated?” asked Renya incredulously. He could not help but feel his gaze toward her growing colder.

“What else was I supposed to do?” yelled the girl, her fists clenched tightly at her sides. “You can take the high road and preach all you want, but in the end, all that matters to

humans for their first impression are looks. When a cute guy puts his arm around a lady's shoulder, it rarely becomes a problem, but if some creepy otaku did that, it's suddenly sexual harassment and indecent assault and police sirens are going off all over the place. Isn't that how reality works, huh?"

"It is, but— Ugh, forget it! More importantly, what about the blessing? Weren't you going to give me something?!" Something told Renya it was a very bad idea to let the girl continue her rant, so he quickly cut her off. It proved effective, as the girl relaxed and clapped her hands together.

"Oh, right. First, allow me to grant you your first blessing: Wakasa."

"...You mean the place with the nuclear generators?"

"...Not that Wakasa. You're heading to an alternate world, for God's sake. What's the point in gifting you a chunk of Japan?"

Despite his generous lead-in, the girl barely made an effort at a witty comeback. He was actually hoping for her to play the straight man for once, considering she had been spewing no small amount of bile at people for the past while, but his attempt did not pay off. His offer to trade roles was met with much indifference.

"I meant the other Wakasa, the Japanese word for youth! I'm saying I'll take your decrepit 94-year-old body and use my power to dial it back to a perky eighteen."

"Isn't the 94-year-old body better for me? That way, I'll die almost immediately and get sent back here for reincarnation." From Renya's perspective, he had nothing to do there once he dropped off the Resources, so he had no reason to live a long life. While the idea was indeed impressively efficient, the sheer jaded nature of it left the girl speechless, her mouth hanging open in shock.

"It's not like I have anything to do there, right?" he said.

"W-Well, I guess that's true... But we're talking an

alternate world here! Swords and shields! Robes and wizard hats! A world filled with riches and adventure! You can probably have your own harem there if you try hard enough! What's with the degenerate attitude, you old fart?"

"Well, attitudes aside, I *am* old..."

He was, after all, 94 years old. Upon being reminded of this fact, the girl found herself at a loss for words.

"Huh? Oh, uh... Hm..." She rapidly stroked the window she just opened with her fingers, her face a mask of deep thought. The semi-transparent nature of the window made it hard to read, and Renya could not make out its contents from where he stood. After poking at the display for a little while, the girl seemed to find what she was looking for. Her expression lit up and she turned toward him.

"Renya, here's something you might want to know. That world actually has many delicious foods that didn't exist in your original world."

"Oh?" Renya soon caught on to the girl's intention. Presumably, she was trying to dig out some information that would motivate him, or at least make him want to stay alive. Despite remembering little of his previous life, the words "delicious foods" had an irresistible pull. He figured he was probably a foodie in his previous life.

"Of course, while there are things that are both cheap and tasty, there are also wonderful delicacies that'll cost you an arm and a leg. Tasting all of them will require a large amount of money. Making a large amount of money is impossible for a 94-year-old geezer," proclaimed the girl with her hands folded firmly into fists.

"Fair point. I'll take you up on it. Going in a young body is fine, then. Now, how about you tell me the honest reason? Hiding things from me won't do you any favors."

"After I attach the Resources to your soul, it'll probably take a few decades for them to disperse. I can't just drop you there and be done with it. Dead bodies don't disperse Resources. That's why I'd really appreciate it if you lived for

as long as possible. That's the whole of it, honest. God's honor."

At Renya's urging, the girl parted with the truth surprisingly quickly. Apparently, she really did realize that it did no good to hide things from him.

"This isn't much of a blessing, then, is it? More like a necessary protocol."

"Hnnngh... Normally, as soon as I tell them they get to be young again, they're all, like, 'Omigosh thank you my lord' and stuff, and then I have them dancing in the palm of my hand..." The girl, with the most innocent downcast gaze and watery eyes, muttered some terribly wicked words.

"If you're going to call it a blessing, give me a real gift. Stuff to keep me alive and disperse Resources are more like necessary expenses, right?"

"Hmph, what kind of blessing do you want, then?" asked the girl, completely abandoning the effort of thinking and throwing the question to Renya instead. "Let's just say my blessing will be 'The right to be granted that which you, Renya, deem necessary.'"

"Money."

His sudden reply startled the girl and she drew back in shock.

"Also, an impenetrable home base that's guaranteed to be safe and unbelievably overpowered fighting skills."

"Please, no... Think about the balance... oh, the poor balance. It'd be so broken, the world would probably collapse from that first."

The girl managed to chain her startled lurch into a full prostration. It was honestly an impressive sequence. She then proceeded to rub her forehead against the ground. The display was so pitiful that even Renya felt guilty.

"They would have been nice to have, but I guess I can't expect that much."

"It's not impossible for me to make you a ludicrously large mountain of rare metals, but it'd cause a breakdown of the

global currency system. I can give you enough power to flatten a country on your own, but nothing good can come of that. The impenetrable home base, I can also make, but the secondary activities that are possible upon settling down there..."

"Okay, I get it. It was just a thought, so you can get up already," said Renya to the girl who had nearly curled up into a ball. He supposed she felt ashamed at being made to eat her words so soon. "Well, since I get to be young again, it'd be nice to stay healthy."

Judging that spending any more time in their current situation would only make things more awkward, he quickly rattled off whatever came to mind, trying to give priority to the simpler ones first.

"R-Right. Good health. Check."

"Plus, I'm apparently pretty fond of eating and drinking, so I need a stomach and liver that can take plenty of abuse."

"I see. Alcohol resistance and a voracious appetite."

"I also need to make money, so I'll want some sort of ability for doing that. You said this was a sword-and-magic world, right? I assume the fastest way is through more dangerous work?"

"Indeed. I'll just add a few things here and there for fighting prowess..."

The girl listened intently as Renya spoke. She also pulled out a notepad from somewhere and was frantically taking notes on what he said. He took a moment to acknowledge the mismatch in what he was witnessing. For someone who could materialize windows from thin air, her notetaking was jarringly analog.

"I also want to try making something," he continued. "I don't know why, but the thought of being a blacksmith — a swordsmith, specifically — appeals to me."

"Mmhm. Oh, speaking of which, I do believe you used to be a ranked kendo practitioner."

"Is that so? Wait, you erased those kinds of memories,

too?"

"The skills are probably still with you, though. As muscle memory."

"Let's see... If there's magic in the world, I'd like to be able to use it. I won't ask to wield every form of magic available, but I'd prefer to at least excel in one type."

"I see, I see. By the way, which do you think is more important: damage or attack speed?"

"Attack speed, obviously. Is there a point to this question?"

The way Renya saw it, "devastating if it hits" was the same as "useless if it doesn't."

"Certainly. It's for reference."

"Also, I don't expect to be the strongest man alive right off the bat, but try to make it so training pays off a lot for me. And I think that's about it."

"Hmm, I see. Oh, do you have any requests regarding your physical appearance?"

The question caught Renya off guard. He gave the girl a questioning look. She continued unperturbed.

"Your original body, having met its end in its original world, has been cremated and is now lying in a grave somewhere. When I send you to the other world, I'll have to fabricate a new body for you to inhabit."

"Oh, I see."

"For this, there's a little bit more leeway, so I can be more accommodating of your demands. A dashing Casanova whose gaze alone can cause the ladies to swoon? A luscious beauty before whom lies countless men fallen to the ground in unmoving prostration after a single look? Whatever you want, feel free to hit me with it."

"I can swap genders?"

"It's a new body, after all. I'll be making it from scratch, so either way is fine."

Renya had the distinct notion that he was male. The framework of his memories had been reset, so he could not

say for sure. Even from his name, however, he doubted he was female. With that in mind, he pondered his options. It was, honestly, not rocket science. The question was simple: did he want to thrust or be thrust upon? Simple, but most certainly crucial. After a moment, he made up his mind.

“Male, please. As long as I’m not ugly. The kind of normal person you can find anywhere.”

“Understood. An average physical appearance that neither offends nor charms.”

After scribbling all the way down to the bottom of the page, the girl ripped it from the pad, scrunched it up into a ball, and placed it on her hand. She puckered her tiny lips and blew a small breath at the paper ball. It burst into flames in her hand and soon turned to ash.

Renya watched it happen, wondering what she was doing with the note she spent so much effort writing. Just then, he saw a message appear out of the corner of his eye. It was the same kind as when the angels disappeared.

□ Notification: You gained “Healthy Body,” “Super Regen,” “Alcohol Resistance,” “Voracious Appetite,” “Blacksmith,” “Sword Mastery,” “Physical Mastery,” “Magecraft Mastery (Aptitude: Wind),” “Quickcast,” “High-Speed Recharge,” “Simulcast,” “Limit Break Leveling,” “Appraisal,” “Foreign World Language.” □

“What the heck is this?”

“Uh, you can think of those as skills you get in video games— Oh, I suppose a 94-year-old wouldn’t have played games.”

“Actually, I sort of get it.”

Thanks to his memory wipe, he could not recall whether he took up playing games in his senior years to keep himself from getting bored, but got the gist of what the girl was trying to say.

“Really? I guess I don’t have to explain, then. In any case, I’ve given you the skills that you asked for. Please try out each of your skills and learn how to use them. Aside from the

skills, I'll also provide you with a hotline to me that you can use once per day. I can't promise I'll answer everything, though. Just keep that in mind, please. To use it, just visualize it in your head."

"I see. Okay, when are you going to send me there?"

"Anytime. We can get going as soon as you're ready," answered the girl. A faint orb of light, elliptical in shape and as tall as a person, appeared beside her. Renya figured it was probably the gate that led to his otherworldly destination.

"Well, I guess I'm off. How long do you think until we meet again?"

"If things go awry, immediately. Normally, it should be a few decades later. If things go well, it's possible we might never meet again."

"Are you telling me there's a way to gain immortality? Huh. Well, if I like what I see there, maybe I'll try looking for it."

"I cannot answer that. I do think it's worth looking around, though."

With a resigned smile, Renya gave the girl a look that said, "Seriously? That might as well have been a yes." He turned around and, waving casually back at her, walked toward the gate.

"All right. See you, then."

"Please allow me to apologize once again for dragging you into this. I wish you well, and hope that your new life will be a good one."

As he stepped through the gate, Renya saw the girl give a quick bow. A line of words appeared in his view.

□ Notification: You gained the blessing of the Creator. □

Thus did Renya Kunugi, who neither wanted nor wished for any of this, take his first step toward a brand new world and his new life.

Interlude: The First One, or So It Was Told

“And there he goes...” whispered the girl to herself as she watched the figure disappear into the glowing gate. “God I am, yet God I’m not. If I were truly all-powerful and all-knowing, I wouldn’t have had to ask a human child to do this for me.”

“Have we still heard nothing from the Administrators over there?”

A figure suddenly appeared behind the girl. It was one of the blond-haired beauties with wings she’d shooed away a while ago.

“Not even a peep. I swear, it’s not like I bite, and I told them I don’t want the administrative privileges back, but they just refuse to believe me. Is the throne of a god really that appealing?” asked the girl with a shrug, her tone slightly incredulous. The lady shook her head.

“I cannot comment on the throne,” she replied, “seeing as I have never sat upon it.”

“You haven’t? Really? You wanna try one somewhere?”

“Surely, you jest. That is a task far too onerous for the likes of one such as myself,” said the lady, declining the offer with a small bow.

“True,” the girl said, nodding in agreement, “that’s probably the wise answer. It’s a lot of trouble for no gain. In fact, if someone offered to do my job for me, I’d take them up on it in a heartbeat. I’d love to live as a carefree human.”

“You wish to surrender your infinite lifespan and near-omnipotent powers to step into the cycle of reincarnation with a life of barely one hundred years and your wisdom and

experiences wiped clean each time?" the lady asked with mild surprise. She was met with a blank look that clearly suggested the girl did not see the question coming.

"You think it's weird?"

"I certainly cannot see myself considering the same."

"How long has it been since you were brought into existence?"

"If my memory is correct, I believe approximately a millennium ago," answered the lady as she searched through her vast store of memories, trying to dig up its singular origin. As she did, the expression on the girl's face gradually shifted from blankness to comprehension.

"Mmm, I guess you wouldn't understand, then."

"Is that so?"

"In my case, it's been about eleven billion two hundred and sixty million years since I formed. That's what I remember, anyway. A lot of things have happened during that time, and I still remember every last one of them down to the smallest detail. And in case you're wondering, yes, it's nothing but pure agony."

The girl let out a sigh. It was a small one, but it was also deep. There was a weight to that sigh, coupled with a darkness in her eyes when she glanced up, that sent a chill down the lady's spine. At once, she realized that for her, a being of mere millennia, the sheer depths of that gaping abyss she saw was entirely unfathomable.

"I'm tired... I've had enough... Such emotions, I've already forgotten. I've forgotten how long ago I've forgotten. I simply create, destroy, and create again. I'm but a vessel of memories — a mere construct of remembrance — for all that has and will transpire. If this is what it means to be God, then... is there anything left to do but laugh?"

"That is..."

The lady tried to speak, but no words came. She bit her lip, realizing the true extent of the girl's existence and the immeasurable vastness of her time. There were no words she

could say that the being before her had not already heard. There was no comfort she could offer.

"With that said, though, there is a high note every once in a while. Taking a boot to the face, for example. Even for me, that's definitely on the rarer side of things," said the girl in a noticeably lighter tone. It was obviously an attempt to change the topic and brighten the atmosphere, but the lady decided to play along.

"By rarer, do you mean to imply that it has happened a few times in the past?"

"Well, it's a first for a human child. If we're talking about angels, I'd say maybe once in a millennium or so..."

"So, some basic arithmetic would deduce that you have been kicked over a million times."

"Yeah. Can you believe it? I gave birth to them, for God's sake. So heartless."

While the lady thought that the girl could drastically decrease her incidence of foot-to-face encounters simply by acting more reasonably, she had the good sense to keep that to herself. After all, mobilizing eighty percent of the entire angel population just to welcome a single human child was guaranteed to garner some ill will. While lower-ranked angels might have been indifferent, her close aids would definitely have felt the urge to give her a good kick or two.

"Let's put those issues aside and discuss something else. We should figure out what equipment we're going to give Renya. We can't send him there empty-handed and expect him to survive. That'd be just cruel."

"True. But since this is you we are talking about, I assume you have already prepared a list of items?"

"Yeah, I guess I have. Wanna take a look?"

The lady was not surprised. She had been dealing with the girl for a good number of years and was intimately familiar with her definition of "figure out," by which she meant "inform of the fact that appropriate items have been

selected and probably already sent to the corresponding world." At this point, being shown the list was often a formality and she had no actual say in the matter. Resisting the urge to point out that she was not even in any position to say no, the lady approached the girl, who was poking at a new window she'd just materialized. She eyed its contents.

"That is a surprisingly unremarkable list."

It contained medicine and food, some cash on hand, as well as weapons and armor. Quite ordinary. So much so, the lady thought, that she saw no need to seek another's approval.

"Personally, I'd have given him maybe a weapon from around here. Some godly thing, you know? But my aides, ugh, they were like, no, there's this and that and blah blah blah. I told them that considering we're the ones asking him to cross over into that world, we should give him some amount of power to guarantee his safety, but nope, they just wouldn't listen."

"It would be a problem if whatever you gave Renya remained in that world after his death," the lady pointed out. As far as she knew, the people in the world that Renya traveled to believed that Artifact-class items were created by the gods, but they were wrong. Items like those had only two possible origins: they were either created by the Administrators and left in the world, or made by humans through some miraculous coincidence and people just decided to believe it was a gift from the gods. If real gods actually went and made a weapon with their own hands, its power would defy the comprehension of mere humans. Were such a thing left behind in a world, it would almost certainly be the cause of much trouble. In that sense, the opposition of the girl's aides to her idea was doubtlessly justified. With those thoughts in mind, the lady's gaze stopped on a certain row of the list.

"Uh... What might this 'shinai' item be?"

"It's a bamboo sword. Some parts of Renya's old world

used it as a practice weapon. It's light and tough, but it's about as non-lethal as weapons get. Renya has experience in kendo, so he should be familiar with how to handle it."

"Have you shown this list to your aides?" asked the lady. Her voice shook a little.

"Yeah. Why?" The girl replied once again with a blank look.

"Did they read the detailed explanation of each item?"

"Nah, they sort of skimmed it and were like, 'K, this looks fine.'"

The lady looked at the list again, her mind reeling with shock. It was likely that the girl's aides knew what a shinai was. For those angels, it was probably just some piece of bamboo, so when they saw it in the list, they just waved it off and gave their approval. For her, however, she had no idea what it was. Therefore, she had to read the appended explanation properly. That was how she noticed.

"This bamboo sword has got the 'Indestructible' property on it, yes?"

"Well, duh. You realize regular bamboo swords are literally just bamboo, right? They'd break if you hit anything with them."

From the girl's perspective, it was a mere compromise — one made reluctantly after her aides' objections — to sending Renya a proper weapon. In a world where people swung around weapons with actual sharpened blades, she doubted there would be much point to carrying a stick of bamboo. Its lightness limited its power, and it would last only a few hits at most in a clash against a real sword. Worst case scenario, the opponent's blade might just cut clean through it. For a gift from God herself, it was pitifully feeble, and she was not okay with that. Therefore, she added the "Indestructible" property to it. Even if it was made of bamboo, as long as it did not break, it would stand a fair chance against a real sword. Of course, being hit by it would still hurt exactly as much as a piece of bamboo, which is to

say, not very much at all. Since kendo practitioners also used the shinai to block attacks, she figured that as long as Renya could land hits without getting hit himself, he would be fine. She was, in fact, a hundred and twenty percent confident in his ability to do exactly that.

“Could you perhaps enlighten me,” said the lady, acutely aware of the mistake in the girl’s logic, “of what happens when an object with the ‘Indestructible’ property collides with a destructible one?”

“Well, it’d— AH!” After a short moment of consideration, the girl shrieked as realization dawned on her. “Okay, so, when an indestructible object collides with a destructible one, the destructible one breaks without exception, right?”

“That is correct. Without. Exception. Let that sink in for a minute. In other words, the bamboo sword you gave Renya is imbued with the ability to shatter absolutely anything and everything, be it physical or ethereal. So long as it is destructible, if he keeps hitting it, he *will* destroy it! Do you see the problem here?!”

“Right. That means he can walk up to literally anything, whack it with his bamboo, and watch it crack. Castle walls, dragonscale, mithril and orichalcum, it’d rip through all of them... He can even nullify magecraft by wiping out barriers, spells, and seals!”

“You did not give him a weapon. You turned him into a walking armory! Is there anything you can do to fix it right now?!”

“I already sent the damn thing over! I can technically still change the properties of an item in another world, but I’d have to override the Administrator, and that’d have some serious repercussions for that world. Ugh, I’m such an idiot!”

The girl squatted down with her head in her hands. Seeing the regret on her face, the lady decided that maybe she had been too hard on the girl. At least she recognized just how serious the issue was and reflected on her mistake. Her repentance would not fix the terrible problem she

caused, but it was worth something. Or, it would have been, were it not for the girl's next words.

"What was I thinking, putting such an awesome ability on a bamboo sword of all things?!"

"That is not the problem!"

Her gaze fixed on the crouching girl, the lady pulled up her leg and swung it forward in a wide arc. The hem of her clothes rolled all the way up to the top of her thighs, but she paid it no mind, instead focusing all her attention on unleashing a full-blown soccer kick at the girl's head. In terms of pure muscle power, there was a considerable difference between Renya and her. He was a human. She was an angel.

With no time to block, the girl took the kick squarely in the head and shot up into the sky. Spinning like a soccer ball, she spiralled wildly through the air before landing back on the ground with a heavy thud.

"Wh-Who'd have thought this would happen twice in such a short time..." groaned the girl as she crawled back with one hand pressed against the spot where she was kicked.

"To be fair," said the lady, "some things such as iron or mithril can probably take a few hits and still survive. Not everything is going to melt like butter. Human bodies, though, will! Skin, muscle, bone, whatever. It will chew right through them! Non-lethal? No. That thing is going to be *very, very lethal.*"

"Yeah, you're right. Being indestructible, it might as well be a club. An insanely sturdy club that's light enough to be swung like a bamboo sword. Man, I definitely botched this one."

"On top of that, things produced by magecraft have no physical toughness, so they will be falling apart left and right."

"Some might be a little more resistant depending on the scale and strength of the spell, but yeah. Ultimately, there's nothing it can't destroy, so it can technically nullify all forms

of magecraft. Pretty crazy.”

“Just so you know, nothing in that world has the ‘Indestructible’ property. No such object exists there.”

That meant it was impossible to find another item like the bamboo sword in question in that world, no matter how hard one looked. Its rarity alone would make it priceless. Such concerns, however, seemed to have gone right over the girl’s head.

“Indestructibility is a doozy, huh. I mean, it’s on every single weapon around here, so it never occurred to me how significant it was.”

“The only silver lining in all this is the fact that the sword is not sharp.”

Otherwise, it would be an unstoppable blade that never dulled. It was terrifying to imagine the effects that would have on the world.

“Hmm, I guess there’s no point crying over spilled milk. Still, seeing the ‘Indestructible’ property on some dinky little bamboo sword offends my artistic sensibilities. That needs to be remedied.”

“For the love of— Ugh, whatever. I don’t care anymore,” mumbled the lady.

“It’s gotta look cooler! I need to remake it into something awesome! You know those swords protagonists use in those games? Yeah! Something like that!”

“Go choke on your stupid swords, you dumbass deity!”

For the third time in one day, the girl who styled herself God was sent flying through the air by a kick to the head.

Chapter 1: There Was Trouble on the Double, or So It Was Told

“Oh, okay. Cute gimmick. I get what this is. This is one of those ‘Hey, look at how NOT like your original world this is’ moments to drive the point home. Yep, doesn’t get much more not-my-original-world than this.”

Almost immediately after stepping through the gate of light that materialized beside the young girl who called herself God, Renya found himself in a forest somewhere. He was standing on well-trodden ground that appeared to be a road. Deep woods flanked the road on both sides, and there was nothing to see in either direction but trees. Above him was a clear sky, beautifully blue. Renya glanced up. If he still harbored any doubts about whether this was the same world in which he previously lived for 94 years, they were dispelled by the two suns glowing brightly overhead.

While the existence of two suns definitely shocked him, he found some relief from the fact that the sky was still blue. It was at least a familiar color. If this alternate world had decided to show up with a purple sky or something, he would have had to either accept a disturbing new reality or part ways with his sanity. He did not want to find out which would have happened first.

He looked at the trees surrounding him. He had no idea what any of them were, but then again, he was no connoisseur of trees. Judging from their basic appearance, however, they did not seem too different from the ones in his old world. It seemed that some of his common sense was still applicable here, and that made him feel better. The reset may have wiped his memories clean, but the skills and

experiences ingrained in him were a good deal more resilient.

He was wearing a clean white shirt along with pants and simple leather shoes. Realizing that he had forgotten to ask about how dangerous this place was, he checked around and found that he was not armed in any way. Walking around in an unknown forest of a foreign world with nothing but the clothes on his back seemed like a bad idea. Just then, the word “Inventory” appeared in his field of view. He focused his gaze on it as though selecting it with a cursor, and a semi-transparent window appeared before him. It was the same kind as the one the young girl had used to show him the map. A fifteen-by-fifteen grid was displayed on the window. There were tiny little icons in some of the spaces. One of the icons looked like money, so he touched it with his finger. Immediately, information began to stream into his head.

□ Currency: 10 Gold Coins □

Apparently, it really did mean money. Figuring that this was some sort of parting gift from God, he examined each of the other icons. In total, the items he found in his inventory window included: ten gold coins, twelve packets of emergency rations, six basic medicinal herbs, three bandages, one bamboo sword, one set of leather armor, and one water bottle — water included.

While the leather armor made sense, he could not for the life of him figure out why there was a bamboo sword. As he poked at the icon, a passage of explanatory text flashed across his mind.

□ Bamboo Sword: Class 10 (Artifact), “Indestructible” □

He raised an eyebrow, wondering what “Artifact” meant. The answer appeared almost immediately.

□ Notification: Help Activated - Artifacts are lost relics. They refer to handicrafts of a quality unachievable by the hands of man. All such items are

categorized as class 10 without exception. □

Well, that's convenient. I think I can get used to this, thought Renya to himself as he took a moment to appreciate his new body.

Apparently, the bamboo sword hailed from the land of God and, despite its conspicuous bamboo-ness, was of a correspondingly high level of quality. Following that line of logic, he tapped the icon of the leather armor, as well, wondering what godly wonders lay therein.

□**Leather Armor: Class 2, Generic Item**□

Well, then. So much for being utterly invincible. Feeling a tad disappointed that his armor was mere garden variety, Renya moved his hand to the top of the inventory window and double-tapped an icon there. Two indicators appeared: "Equip" and "Take Out." He immediately selected Equip. The leather armor icon vanished from the inventory, and his body began to glow faintly. When the light faded, his torso was protected by a chest piece that appeared over his shirt, and arm guards were covering his arms from elbow to wrist. Apparently, they came as a set. His head and lower body remained unguarded, which he was not entirely satisfied with. As the saying goes, however, beggars can't be choosers, so he put it out of his mind and equipped the bamboo sword as well.

The sword turned out to be exactly the same as he remembered. It was a little over a meter, a length known as "Sankyu." The term meant three-nine, which referred to its length in traditional units of measurement — three shaku and nine sun. This put it on the longer side, and such a sword would normally be employed by taller people. Regardless, it remained light and easy to wield. Therefore the longer the better, in Renya's opinion.

As he held it in his hand and regarded it, the question came back to him: why a bamboo sword of all things? In response, a message appeared in his mind again.

□**Notification: Help Activated - I actually wanted**□

to give you some kind of short sword, but all the weapons around here are class 10 and the angels refused to let me grab one. I figured that since you had kendo experience in your previous life, you'd feel right at home with a bamboo sword, so I sent you one instead. —From God □

After reading the explanation from the help function that apparently moonlighted as some sort of messenger service, Renya felt a little less miffed by the piece of bamboo in his hand. There was, after all, some thought put into it. He had to give her credit for that. It did not explain why there was a bamboo sword in the land of God, but that question was likely to remain unanswered in the foreseeable future, so he pushed it out of his mind and started thinking about what his next step should be.

As soon as he set foot into this world, he had basically completed the girl's request already. *Oh, wait*, "God's" *request*. He insisted on putting air quotes around that word in his head. All that remained, in a manner of speaking, was to chill for a couple of decades and wander around, disseminating these so-called Resources that were somewhere in his body. His goal was a long stretch of an empty highway away, and he had cruise control. With that in mind, he figured he might as well enjoy these few decades ahead of him. To that end, he was going to have to procure the things necessary for a nice and easy life.

"First, I need to find civilization. Everything starts from there."

He had no idea whereabouts he was in relation to the map he was shown before coming here, but since he was standing on a road, as long as he kept walking along it in one direction, he would doubtlessly find a town sooner or later. The only issue was which direction he should head in. Even if he heavily rationed his supplies, they would last him a few days at most. The worst was that he only had one bottle of water. That meant every drop of it had to be used

as drinking water, which left nothing for other tasks such as certain hygienic practices of the hands, face, and body. As a Japanese expat, said hygienic practices were of paramount importance. He had, therefore, a serious problem.

“Ugh, I guess I’ll have to just deal with it. Damn it, why’d she have to drop me in the middle of nowhere? That freaking loli, I swear...” muttered Renya under his breath. Despite being aware that she probably chose somewhere uninhabited so no one saw him appear, he could not help but curse at her. As he uttered a string of frustrated expletives, the emptiness of swearing out loud in the middle of a forest with no one around to hear slowly caught up with him and he stopped. He took a small branch lying at the side of the road and propped it up on the ground.

“Not the most original idea, but whatever. Let’s see which way you fall,” he said as he surrendered his decision to God. Then, he remembered who God was and reconsidered. The thought of relying on that little girl irked him, so he instead decided to leave his choice up to random chance.

“All right, let’s see what *random chance* has in store for me,” he said as he let go of the stick. As it began to fall, the surrounding silence was broken by the faint sound of a human voice. He turned toward its direction. The stick fell the other way.

“God damn it, I hate random chance...” mumbled Renya as he stared as the stick, perfectly aligned with the road but pointing in the exact opposite direction of the sound. If he kept to his original plan, he would have to follow the stick, but the sound he heard was unmistakably a person’s scream. He probably had little time to hesitate, but hesitate he did. On the one hand, there was the stick. On the other, the source of a scream and likely some sort of trouble. Ignoring the scream and heading off in the other direction felt like running away. However, he’d just arrived in this world and was a stranger to everyone around, so he had no obligation to act, either. After chewing on the choice for a

little while, he ran off in the direction of the scream. Asking himself why he did, he found that he had no answer. The best he could come up with was that a voice meant a person, and a person — hostile or not — meant the chance to ask for directions to a town. At worst, he could just ignore whatever was happening and walk away. With his mind set, he quickened his steps toward the source of the voice, bamboo sword held firmly in his left hand.

The speed at which he ran surprised him. Thanks to the girl, physically, his body was indeed young and fresh and devoid of any old memories. Mentally, though, it was still inhabited by a 94-year-old soul who kicked the bucket after racking up a whole lot of checkmarks on its list. Somewhere in that soul was the distinct impression that his legs had not felt so light when he was alive. The pleasure of such an experience alone might be worth the price of admission. Feeling rather glad he took God up on her offer, Renya kept up his brisk run. He gave an appreciative nod toward his body, which had not even broken a sweat, and trained his eyes on the fast-approaching source of the scream.

He could faintly make out a number of darker-skinned men in leather armor off in the distance. They stood in a circle surrounding two women. One had blond hair and wore a robe like that of a nun. Beside her was the other one, who stood with her back toward the first woman in a protective stance. The second woman had her long black hair in a ponytail and was brandishing a long sword. She was not fully armored, but wore metal plates over the vital points of her body. Seeing their relative positions to the men, Renya immediately decided that walking away was not an option.

There was a part of him that honestly wanted to stand by and watch how things played out. It would be a morally questionable choice, but no one could fault him for being a bystander right now, and it was not the kind of situation one often had a chance to see. Given the circumstances, he figured it was a reasonable thought to have. He was, after

all, a 94-year-old zombie in some ways. Surely, he could afford to be a little more degenerate. Something about acting his age and such.

The group of people he was racing toward quickly noticed him, as well. At first, the men were cautious, but their expressions soon turned mocking as they dropped their guard. The women's expressions, which originally lit up with a glimmer of hope, also shifted to disappointment. Suddenly, it felt awkward for him to jump in now, but it felt equally awkward to stop, turn around, and run back the other way. With no better choice available, he continued his approach.

Even Renya could figure out the gist of what they were thinking from their expressions. The men had their guard up for a moment, thinking a new enemy might have appeared. When they got a good look at Renya, they probably decided immediately that he was not a threat. For the women, it must have looked like help had arrived, but upon closer inspection, they realized that he was unlikely to be of much help at all. It was probably the crude leather armor and the bamboo sword. They were a little lacking in the intimidation factor. Renya comforted himself with that thought.





Turning his attention back to more pressing matters, he stopped a short distance away from the group of people and coughed lightly before speaking.

"Okay um... Do you, uh, understand what I'm saying?" asked Renya hesitantly.

"What do you want?" replied one of the men. "And what's with that getup? Are you a deserter? Just ran away from a battlefield or something?"

Renya's concern was whether or not he could actually communicate in this world. He remembered gaining a bunch of skills when he was with the girl and one of them was something about foreign world language, but when faced with the sudden need for actual conversation, it was still a little nerve-wracking.

Since he obviously did not know the first thing about languages in this world, if he could not use the skill, he would have a very hard time keeping up a conversation. When he worriedly posed the question, however, not only did the other party understand him, but he was also surprised to learn that he himself had no idea what he was saying. The words that came out of his mouth sounded completely foreign to him. Despite that, he could speak perfectly well, and people apparently understood what he said.

On the contrary, when he tried to vocalize a word from a language in his old world, he found that he simply could not. It was quite the astounding discovery, but that was how the foreign world language skill worked. He had yet to make up his mind as to whether this was a good thing, but for the time being, he was glad that he would not have any problems communicating.

"Hey, you. What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" asked one of the men. A round of laughter followed as they took his silent contemplation for fear. To them, he must have barged into the scene, realized what he was up against, and metaphorically wet his pants.

"Oh, uh, yeah. About that. Just chill for a sec."

Paying absolutely no mind to the mocking laughter, he observed the two women who were surrounded. Both of them would have been peerless beauties in his original world. The robed woman's long blond hair fell in soft waves and her big blue eyes curled down at the corners in a way that lent them the slightest hint of listlessness. Her dark robe covered the whole of her body. Back in his old world, it would have borne a sharp resemblance to the kind of clothing worn by people whose professional title tended to be "Sister." Its unassuming nature, however, was negated by the fact that it was barely able to contain the contents it clothed. Endowed with qualities describable only by such terms as "boing" and "yowza," the body inside seemed to decry its unfair treatment, pushing against the fettering fabric and demanding to unleash its wonders upon the waiting eyes of all the men in the world. No matter how much Renya tried, he could not help but think the woman somehow mistakenly put on a robe that was a good size or two too small for her.

The other beauty stood in front, shielding the first woman against their enemy. Her dark eyes had a slight upward tilt that accentuated her sharp gaze. Long black hair, elegant and lustrous, was tied back relatively high up on her head. Her figure was not as voluminous as the woman behind her, but no less pleasing. Curves and lines ran up and down her body in a most appealing fashion, emboldened by her black shirt, long red pants that bloomed like a skirt, and her metallic chestplate, shoulder guard, and arm guards.

Next, he shifted his gaze to the men. Immediately, he shifted it back.

He quietly mumbled something about boring and a waste of his time, but took note of the dark skin they shared, as well as how their leather armor resembled his in design but looked better in quality. Also, it was strange that none of them seemed to be armed. They were all empty-handed.

Although there were six of them, he began to think that maybe the black-haired woman would be fine on her own, considering she had a weapon. The woman's next words, surprisingly, proved him wrong.

"I don't know who you are, but run! These guys are too much!"

"Huh? Really?"

"These people are warriors from the Mercenary Kingdom! Forget about us! Just run!" yelled the woman with a look on her face that implied her brief exclamation should be more than enough to get the point across. It was, of course, not enough, because Renya had not the slightest idea about anything that could be considered common sense in this world.

"Hey, chump, we're busy people, and I doubt we'd make half a coin even if we stripped you naked. I figure I'd be willing to let you off the hook if you hightail it out of here right now."

"Hmm, I wouldn't mind doing that, but there's this nagging thing called a conscience that keeps telling me I'd be a horrible person if I did. You know what I mean?"

Only two types of people would jump into an unfamiliar situation to help out a complete stranger: a protagonist in a story or a total hero. The noun in the second case is synonymous with idiot.

"Oh, wait, I guess the adjective in the second case could also be perverted," said Renya as he mumbled his thoughts out loud.

"The hell are you talking about? What, are you jealous? I'll let you have a go if you want in. After we're all done, of course."

A round of laughter broke out among the men. The pair of women shot him looks of pure revulsion. That was slightly upsetting. Right when he was about to grimace at the treatment he was receiving, the men spoke the words that sealed their fate.

“First of all, what’d you even think you could do with a little stick like that? I’d just grab it and it’d be all over.”

“—What?”

Until that moment, Renya had a distinctly oh-what-a-bother-whatever-shall-I-do kind of expression. It was gone in an instant, replaced by a murderous glare. He was not sure himself why it happened, but a sudden urge welled up within him — the urge to make the man regret every last word he just said.

“Want to say that to me again, punk?”

“The hell are you... What, your dinky little stick? I said I’d just grab it and it’d be all over for you.”

All of a sudden, Renya’s voice changed. He growled in a deep, icy tone. Despite that, the man still thought they had the advantage in numbers and repeated his provocation. Wordlessly, Renya thrust out the bamboo sword with his left hand, brandishing the point at the man.

“What do you think you’re doing, kid?”

“Letting you grab it. The curb stomping will come after that, so clench your cheeks.”

Renya’s frigid declaration was met with a roar of laughter.

“Are you freaking serious? Oh, man, you’re a riot, kid. Hey, this dumbass here said he’d give us a beating with his stick! And he’d let us grab it first!”

“The poor kid probably lost his mind.”

“What an idiot! Well, let’s have some fun! Here, I’ll grab your little stick for you! Then, maybe you’ll learn to regret how stupid you are!”

The man carelessly grabbed the tip with his right hand.

“Well? I grabbed it. What now?”

It was likely that he intended to pull on the bamboo sword, thereby forcing Renya toward him and following up with an attack. He did not expect what Renya did next. As soon as he grabbed the tip, Renya placed both hands on the hilt and quickly twisted it. The shape of a bamboo sword was such that the hilt was slightly thicker than the tip. With one

side holding the thick end, and the other holding the thin, it was obvious who had the advantage. Unless there was an overwhelming difference in strength, the thick end would win every time. The torque applied by Renya to the hilt transferred instantly to the tip, forcing it to spin, as well. Immediately after, he pulled the sword out of the man's hand. In truth, all he did was a simple twist-and-pull action, but that was also all it took for the man to be suddenly grasping thin air.

"Huh?"

Judging by his response, the man was probably fairly confident in his strength. As a result, when he lost his grip on the sword, he simply failed to comprehend what had happened. He was never given the chance to, either.

Renya was not nearly nice enough to wait for reality to work its way into the man's head. With his bamboo sword pulled back, he took a lunging step forward and thrust it back out at the man's neck. With the weight of his entire body focused into a pinpoint stab, the tip of his sword sank deeply into the baffled man's throat before lifting him off his feet and sending him hurtling backwards through the air. While the gawking onlookers stood in place trying to wrap their heads around what just happened, Renya deftly reverted to Seigan-no-kamae — a neutral stance — and uttered a low growl.

"This is not a stick. It is a *sword*. What it's made of is irrelevant."

"You damn ki—"

The man probably meant to say "kid," but before he could finish, he took a thrust to the pit of his stomach and crumpled onto the ground into a pool of his own spit.

They had no clue. None of them understood what it meant to be within striking distance of Renya. They were in his hurt zone.

Renya dashed to and fro between the men, all of whom seemed too shocked to react. With blistering speed, the

bamboo sword in his hand screeched through the air again and again, allowing its targets no chance to defend, let alone retaliate. It cracked brows, crushed throats, bruised stomachs, and broke noses. Thrust after devastating thrust slammed into various vital spots on the men. It took little time before they all fell to the ground, eyes rolled back in their heads.

“I doubt they were listening, though. Whatever,” said Renya as he broke Zanshin — the state of readiness one returns to after each strike — and lowered his stance. In one smooth motion, he returned his bamboo sword to the left side of his waist.

“This might look harmless, but it’s still a weapon, and it’s definitely lethal. There’s a reason thrusts are banned until you reach a certain age.”

Be it kendo or kenjutsu, the most lethal technique in both their repertoires was the thrust. Even the katana, which was known to dull after cutting down two or three people, could be used to stab dozens with its point remaining perfectly sharp. A thrust performed with a bamboo sword, while undeniably less powerful, still carried the risk of killing the opponent in a kendo match.

“Were you expecting me to swing this at you like a club? Look at it. It’s not even sharp. And it’s so light. Which idiot would take something like this and attempt to smack people with its broad side? Come on, man. Think before you mock.” Renya did not expect his unconscious pupils to hear him, but he could not resist the urge to vent.

His thrusts were, in actuality, not simple thrusts. He applied a slight twist to them to improve their penetrating power. In addition, while he was oblivious to the fact, the Indestructible property on his weapon functioned to destroy any destructible objects in its path. When said destructible objects happened to be vital points on a man’s body, the effects were mortally devastating regardless of how well-trained the man was.

With profound apathy, Renya realized that he probably just murdered a few people. The thought elicited absolutely no emotional response.

“...Well, there’s a part of me that *is* degenerate. Funny how it’s always these kinds of things.”

Six men lay on the ground as six unmoving bodies. With a resigned shrug, he glanced down at them as he mused over the oddness of his own thoughts.

Renya examined the men on the ground again. He did not want to deal with the possibility of being attacked when he looked away because one of them was only pretending to be dead. Closer inspection confirmed that they were indeed unconscious, and none of them looked likely to wake up any time soon. His first victim, along with one of the middle ones, took a stab to the throat and had his neck broken. Those two were definitely gone for good. He did not feel particularly guilty, but he did fret a little.

“I wonder if this world recognizes the concept of right of self-defense?”

“Um...”

He heard a hesitant voice and turned around to find both the robed woman and the armored woman approaching him. From up close, he got a better look at them and revised his opinion of their age. While undoubtedly beautiful, they were better referred to as girls instead of ladies. The girl in armor was overtly cautious of him whereas the robed girl bowed to him deeply.

“Thank you very much for helping us.”

“It’s fine. It looks like you didn’t even need the help, anyway,” replied Renya as he glanced at the armored girl. When he’d joined the fray, she told him to run. In that sense, it was possible she felt she could somehow manage on her own. The “these guys are too much” part of her sentence

could have meant either “for me” or “for you.”

The armored girl, who apparently realized what he was thinking about, also lowered her head slightly, though she retained a tone of caution in her voice.

“I’m also grateful for your aid. I doubt I could have done much on my own.”

“...Really? I mean, sure, there were six of them, but they were all empty-handed, weren’t they?”

It seemed unlikely to Renya that the odds would be skewed so much in favor of the men. The armored girl, however, looked up at him in surprise.

“Do you not know about the warriors from the Mercenary Kingdom? These people specialize in unarmed combat. They’re master brawlers who can defeat armed soldiers with nothing but their bare hands.”

Renya took another look at the men sprawled on the ground around them. At that moment, the girl’s claim was not very convincing. The men were certainly well-built, but he had a hard time believing they could go toe to toe with properly trained soldiers. Especially when it was their hands against real weapons. Regardless, considering a local just said they could, it was likely that they fought with some sort of special technique. He continued to stare at the men, puzzled by their strange obsession for unarmed combat. The sight of him gaping calmed the armored girl, who relaxed her posture slightly.

“You’re an odd one, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you for not letting your guard down. I’m, uh... What do you call it again? Oh, right, I’m a Wanderer,” he said, recalling the advice of the girl. Supposedly, once he said that, people would understand. Surprise faded from the expressions of the two girls, replaced by a look of curiosity.

“I see. A Wanderer. I’ve heard about people like you before, but this is my first time meeting one in person.”

“I guess it makes sense that a Wanderer wouldn’t know

about the Mercenary Kingdom.”

“Glad to hear it makes sense for you,” he said, relieved by the ease with which they accepted his explanation, as well as the fact that the girl’s advice rang true. “I’m Kunugi Renya.”

The two girls hurried lowered their heads as well and introduced themselves.

“Pardon me. My name is Rona Chevalier. I’m an apprentice priest.”

“I’m Shion Femme-Fatale, an apprentice swordsman. May I call you Sir Kunugi?”

“Uh... Actually, Renya is my first name. Also, you can drop the Sir. Renya’s fine.”

The two girls turned to each other, their expressions serious, and began whispering among themselves.

“Ren-nya? Re-nya? R-Ren... ya?”

“Okay, in any case, how about we go somewhere else? Four of these guys are still alive, and there’s no telling when they might wake up,” said Renya as he put a stop to their spluttering. The two girls nodded at his suggestion.

“True. Let’s get out of the forest first.”

“What about them?” Renya pointed his thumb at the six men on the ground. The two dead ones notwithstanding, it seemed unreasonable to just ditch them in the forest.

“Left as-is in this forest, they’ll be dead within ten minutes,” said Rona without batting an eye.

“We’re currently at the west edge of the Eastern continent. This place is known as the Miasmal Forest, and it’s teeming with monsters. We’re not very deep in yet, but even here, there are actually lots of things like plants that eat people. You just don’t see them.”

That made the forest seem terrifying to Renya, but the two girls spoke as if it was the most boring thing in the world. Without so much as a glance at the men on the ground, they walked off. Renya was about to follow them, but he paused, feeling a little uncomfortable about leaving

people here to die. Then, it occurred to him that one wrong step might have ended with him lying there in place of the men. With that thought in mind, he placed his palms together and wished them smooth passage to the afterlife before running off after the two girls.

"Renya, would you mind if I asked how long it's been since you came here as a Wanderer?" asked Rona, who walked at the front of the party.

"Just now, basically."

"You managed all that when you only just arrived? That's very impressive."

Renya had no idea what it was that impressed her. He raised an eyebrow as he followed slightly behind the girls. Seeing the puzzled look on his face, Shion joined in.

"Normally, Wanderers are disoriented when they first arrive. Ro's impressed by how quickly you managed to floor a bunch of trained soldiers despite only just arriving."

"Ro?"

"That's how I'm known by people who are close to me," answered Rona with a chuckle.

"I see. So, Rona, why were the two of you in a place like that to begin with?" asked Renya, making sure to avoid her nickname. Surely, he was not included in the category of "those close to her." Rona, however, seemed taken aback by his question.

"Oh? And I just told you my nickname, too. Was that on purpose?"

"I'm not shameless enough to start calling a woman I just met by her nickname."

"Absolutely." Shion nodded. "That's just basic courtesy."

Rona, meanwhile, seemed somewhat disappointed. Her eyes innocent, she looked at Renya with such an air of naiveté that he began to question whether it was really a good idea for a pair of girls like them to be wandering around a place like this.

"I almost never get to hear a man call me that, you know?"

"I'd prefer to not die."

Renya's quip was lost on Rona, who gave him a perplexed look. Shion, however, nodded in approval and mentioned, "He's a smart one."

The two appeared to be very good friends. That much was obvious from Shion's nickname for Rona. In addition, Renya thought that Shion also acted as a guardian of sorts for Rona. Throughout their time walking, Rona did most of the talking. Shion merely threw in a remark here or there and made no effort to strike up a conversation herself. Based on this, Renya figured that Rona was probably the kind of person who could benefit from being a little more wary of others. She saw that Renya helped them and immediately assumed that meant he was trustworthy.

Shion, in comparison, was more cautious. Despite his help, she still harbored enough doubts about him to keep her guard up. From there, it was easy to deduce their relative roles. One was the protector, and the other the protected. Getting too familiar with the latter would probably earn him a swift and painful rebuke from the former. That was why Renya chose to maintain some distance.

"We belong to the Adventurers Guild in the Principality of Triden. We're here on a mission from the guild to investigate and eliminate a horde of goblins," said Shion. It was the first time she'd initiated a conversation. Presumably, she became more at ease once she saw that Renya knew not to push his luck on the social front. "There's been reports from a settlement outside the forest that goblin attacks have been getting worse."

Renya took a moment to mentally review what she just said. He heard a number of unfamiliar words. The Principality of Triden was probably the name of a country somewhere. Specifically, it was probably the name of the

country the two girls lived in. He drew a blank for the Adventurers Guild, but he knew that guilds were associations created by people of similar professions who gathered there and supported each other. If he applied that definition directly, then the Adventurers Guild would be an association made by professional adventurers with the goal of supporting each other. This guild, in turn, hired them for a mission. He also had no idea what a goblin was, but the Almighty Help Function (literally, considering its origin) jumped in to save the day, conveniently displaying explanatory information before his eyes.

□ Notification: Help Activated - Goblins are humanoid monsters with greenish skin and an unsightly appearance. They stand about one meter tall, are entirely hairless, and live in hordes of about twenty individuals or so. They possess no culture to speak of. Female goblins occur extremely rarely, and they normally procreate through crossbreeding with other species. Being incredibly fecund, they are capable of producing offspring with all other humanoid species except elves. They are omnivorous and capable of consuming even rotten matter. Occasionally, individuals with superior ability are born, and these can go on to lead large hordes that number in the hundreds. This is, of course, all common sense if you've played games before. —

From God □

The excerpt was fine until he read the last sentence, at which point he mentally dialed the Smack-o-Meter up another notch. He was keeping track for when he saw her again.

“Okay, correct me if I’m wrong, but goblins are monsters that live in groups, right?”

“That’s right. They’re individually weak, but in numbers, they can be a handful.”

“And you’re going to go investigate and eliminate them?

With the just two of you?" asked Renya. The numbers alone made the idea seem ill-advised, and that did not even take into account the rather alarming tendency of these monsters to abduct the females of other species. No one should be asking a party of two girls to go on a mission like that. His question, however, prompted a hesitant response.

"Originally," said Shion with brows furrowed, "we were supposed to be a party of eight."

Renya did some simple number crunching in his head. Eight minus two equals six. That meant six people were unaccounted for. He just so happened to have incapacitated six people not too long ago. That was probably not coincidence.

"I know what you're thinking, and you're right. Those people we were with just now? They were the ones we took up the mission with."

Renya recalled being told by Shion that all six of them were warriors from the Mercenary Kingdom. In other words, the guys were probably buddies, and the pair of girls joined their team. Then came the dark forest, the lack of any potential witnesses, and the whole "six of us and two of them" situation, not to mention the two of them happened to be rather attractive. It was easy to see how a bunch of birdbrains would come to the conclusion that it was time to party.

"...Bad luck, huh?" Renya offered his rapport.

"Yes!" Shion nodded emphatically. "Just, the *worst*."

Birdbrained as they were, however, Renya had to admit there was a simple-minded logic to their actions, and he knew where they were coming from. Seen from up close, the two girls were definitely headturners. On top of that, one had the tough, sinewy appeal, while the other was all about volume. So much so that there was a distinct sense of weight to their motion. In fact, he was behind her as they walked, and he could *still* see them bouncing up, down, and all around. Surely, any guy who saw that would have his

mind planted firmly in the gutter all day. Whether that should translate to physical action, however, was another story.

That last thought of his caught him by surprise, for it was far less degenerate than he expected. Nevertheless, he turned toward Shion, making sure his eyes were kept firmly on parts of her body that were entirely wholesome, and asked, "So, where are we headed right now?"

"We were using the settlers' village as a makeshift home base, so we're heading back there for now," answered Rona.

"We'd rather go back to Triden, but it's two days until the next horse wagon, and another two days once we get on," Shion added.

Renya nodded along in agreement. As he thought, there was no way the two of them were going to wipe out an entire goblin horde on their own. He was not, however, expecting their next words.

"Renya," said Shion, "you can stay at the village and wait for the next ride to come."

"While eliminating them is now out of the question, we can't head back until we've at least investigated," said Rona.

"Whoa, okay, hold up. Aren't the two of you in way over your heads on this one?"

Renya looked at the priestly robe draped over Rona, its design wholly unsuitable for large amounts of physical movement. Shion was better off, wearing at least something meant for combat. The metal plates that comprised it, however, seemed unfit for the discreet activity of investigation.

"Maybe we are. But if we go back with nothing to show for our efforts, it'll hurt us down the line."

"Once they stop taking you seriously, you're done. That's adventuring for you."

Renya pointed out that the guild should carry some of the blame for setting them up with a team in which six of the

eight members turned out to be backstabbers, but Shion shook her head.

“The guild definitely did a poor job of vetting, but we’ll have to wait two days to report that.”

“If more goblin attacks happen in that time, it’s the villagers who’ll suffer.”

“I guess that’s true...”

Renya was still not convinced. In his opinion, none of that would matter if they ended up dying. In fact, dying might still be preferable to becoming unwilling accomplices in causing a rise in the local goblin population. Their mind, however, was made up, and he had no choice but to give up protesting.

“In that case, how about I give you a hand?” asked Renya, figuring it would weigh on his conscience to ditch them knowing their chances of success were slim to none. The two of them proceeded to discuss his offer with each other in whispers. After a short span, Shion turned toward him.

“Are you sure? We’d be glad to get help, but you don’t belong to the guild, so you won’t receive any rewards.”

“I don’t mind. In case you’re feeling particularly generous, though, I’d appreciate it if you taught me a few things about how this world works.”

“You’re putting your life on the line, and that’s all you’re asking for? Don’t you think you’re getting the short end of the stick?” asked Shion, caution returning to her narrowed eyes.

Renya sighed. Admittedly, her previous experience with male teammates was not exactly smooth sailing, so she had reason to be wary of him. He still felt she was a being a tad too self-conscious, though.

“I think it’s up to me to decide which end of the stick I’m getting, no?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.”

“See, the thing with information is that it’s an afterthought to those who have it, but it’s priceless to those

“who don’t,” he added in a slightly exaggerated attempt to support his own reasoning. Shion scrunched up her face, evidently unconvinced. Rona, however, gave a lighthearted chuckle.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure Renya’s a good person.”

With her friend smiling cheerfully beside her, Shion gave Renya a look that said she was willing to play along for the time being.

“Man,” grumbled Renya, “and I’m honestly trying to be helpful here.” Left alone to his thoughts, he looked up at the sky and wondered why it was so difficult to earn a bit of trust these days.

Interlude: The Second One, or So It Was Told

“Master, what kind of person is this Renya Kunugi?”

The sudden question forced me to turn my attention away from the work I was occupied with and toward the direction of the voice. In the process of doing so, I quietly lamented the unending nature of problems. Honestly, they’re just one continuous pain in the butt. You get rid of one and another pops up. It’s like playing Whack-a-Mole, except it never ends and you can’t stop. In fact, I was just dealing with one of them. Specifically, a couple of hero types somewhere — we’ll just call them Protag and Co. — genuinely believed that they could change the world through the power of will. The whole “you just gotta *believe*” thing. Which was all fine and dandy until they *believed* so hard they became stronger than the local Administrator and started overwhelming his willpower. They were on the verge of actually effecting some change on the world, so he sent me a request for help. In return, I made him sit down and write “My will is strong” on a piece of paper over and over again until I said stop. I told him it was for strengthening his willpower. In the meantime, I had to go deal with Protag and Co. by siccing a supercharged Demon King on them to give them just the right amount of ass-whooping; not enough to kill, but demoralizing enough so they won’t try this again.

As for the dumbass Administrator who needlessly increased my workload, well, I haven’t said stop yet. After all, what better way to punish — erm, I mean, *educate* — the ignorant than a good millennium or so of copying out the same sentence over and over. It builds character.

Of course, the Demon King didn't just randomly gain a bunch of godly new powers. That was all me. Even now, he's probably still scratching his head over how he managed to defeat Protag and Co. If things had proceeded without my intervention, the Demon King would have been defeated, the heroes would have returned to their kingdom amidst flowers and fanfare, and they would have all lived happily ever after. Things, however, did not work out for them. What can I say? Reality is harsh.

You can preach all you want about dreams and ideals and making a world where no one need weep, but a world can't exist without tears. Someone, somewhere, is always crying. I remember hearing it said at some point that the job of Administrators boils down to distributing suffering amongst their people. If a world could run on ideals, there'd be no need for an existence such as mine. And I wouldn't have to keep up this mind-numbing cycle of endlessly patching and balancing and fixing things. I can't even vent because there's nobody to vent to.

For the case in question, I also could not let the Demon King just wipe out Protag and Co., because then I would have to turn another group of people somewhere into heroes to maintain equilibrium. It would just be more work. Therefore, I gave them a chance to compromise by keeping about half of Protag and Co's party alive, hoping — praying — that they'll shake hands and make up. But therein, you see, lies the irony. While man may pray to God, to whom shall God pray? To whom... can I pray?

“So, what were we talking about again?”

“Geez, Master. How much more of a tangent could you go on?” asked the blonde beauty in a tone of exasperation.

“Plenty more. You want me to take it further?”

“Please get back on track.”

The blonde's standoffish tone irked me a little, and I entertained the notion of reincarnating her as a frog or caterpillar, but soon dispelled the thought. All the work she

was supposed to do would end up falling to me. It would be pointless, and more importantly, exhausting.

Okay, fine, I'll get back on track. I'll stay on the damn track for another three hundred and sixty billion seconds, so just let me do my work in peace. Plus, she's the one who talked to me, and now she wants me to get back on track? Who does she think she is, anyway? I didn't raise her like this. Then again, I don't remember raising her at all. And look, it cost me twenty four seconds to think that. That's a 0.000000006% loss. What a waste. Ugh, I can't stand this.

"Master!"

"What do you want, damn it?! Huh? What's a Renya... Oh, you mean the old-timer."

After yelling back at her, I finally figured out who she was talking about and turned my attention away from my work. The supercharged Demon King might have just killed the hero's mistress (whose love for the hero seemed narratively flimsy, in my opinion), and the hero might have just sworn revenge, and there might be some very dark emotions brewing, but I definitely noticed none of that. Even in the entirely hypothetical situation that I did, I wouldn't mind if they dragged both their nations into the ground with them. Maybe then they'd stay quiet for a while. It'd also teach them a lesson about how precious the peaceful monotony of everyday life is.

"If it's the gramps you're talking about, then I don't know."

"What?"

"I mean, I did a search for compatible souls that lived long and prospered and he just happened to pop up. It's not like I dug out his whole life history. I skimmed the notes and it seemed like he was something of a foodie. That's about it."

It was a good thing I skimmed the notes, too. Otherwise, I would have had no idea how to convince the old man. I figured it would be annoying if the soul had some sort of weird lingering attachment to their previous world, so I

searched for one that died peacefully of old age. I have now realized that method has some downsides, as well. Lesson learned.

“You *are* sending a soul into another world, you know? Are you sure it’s okay to have put so little thought into it?”

“What’s the problem?”

My reply caused Subordinate A’s jaw to drop in shock. I honestly had no idea why.

“From the scope of an entire world,” I continued, “one person’s like a drop in the ocean, isn’t it? It’s not like this is some wing flap-tornado butterfly effect nonsense. What can possibly happen?”

“If you say so...” she acquiesced halfheartedly. She began to glumly make her exit, but I stopped her.

“Well, I guess I should take a quick look, considering I’m responsible for sending him there in the first place. Here, come help me.”

“What is there to help with? All you have to do is pull up the search history, right?”

She had a point. I pulled up the history for when I was searching for souls and found the corresponding information. It appeared on the display.

Renya Kunugi, Human

Age at Death: 94

He was sent across the boundary of 9201-0846-2525-4989 to alleviate its Resource deficiency. Original World Identification Number is 8190-9735-1414-3878, of which there is nothing remarkable to report. Before the boundary crossing, he was the fourteenth headmaster of the Kunugi Itto-ryu school of swordsmanship. He displayed interest in kendo at a young age and took up kenjutsu at the age of thirteen. His talents blossomed thereafter. At the age of fifteen, he set out for mainland China, reportedly on a journey to improve his swordsmanship, and became active in the Chinese mafia. Known to cut down numerous foes with

but a single katana, his exploits earned him the nickname “Sword Demon.” In his five years in the Chinese mafia, his total body count was 912. Afterwards, he enlisted and participated in the World War. During his four years in the military, his total body count was 3712. All victims were killed by blade. His code name of “Blade Ogre” struck fear into the hearts of many. After the war, he succeeded the Kunugi school and became its headmaster, devoting his time toward nurturing young talent and increasing public interest in kenjutsu. His widespread performances and live demonstrations of kenjutsu caused the Kunugi Itto-ryu school to become renowned and eventually led to the establishment of forty-nine dojos throughout the world. In his later years, he became a successful swordsmith, signing his creations with the inscription “Ka-Ren,” and was designated a national treasure. He was also known to be a gourmet, refined not only in taste, but in culinary skill, as well. He died of old age at 94 years and one hundred twenty-seven days.

Lifetime Body Count: 5730.

I looked up from the window with what I was sure were hollow, withered eyes.

“...Omfg wth, op much?”

“Your words, Master. Good girls use their words, remember?”

Not missing a beat, Subordinate A makes a snappy remark at my string of inappropriate abbreviations.

“What the hell is this?! I just randomly picked a guy! How did I end up with someone who lived such an outrageous life?!”

“That’s not the kind of life that tends to end in bed at home... It astounds me that someone like him managed to die of old age.”

“He killed over five thousand people with nothing but a katana! How the hell?! And he— Wait, am I reading this

right? This bastard's *post-war body count hit four digits!*
What the flying frack?!"

"And the fact that no special notes came up means he never became a criminal!"

A criminal record would show up under special notes in the display. It only counts, by the way, if there was a factual record of the person breaking a law in their world. Otherwise, it would show up for basically every human being.

Despite the fact that I was in a pinch, I definitely had no intention of sending a criminal across the boundary. My method might have been a tad rushed, but this was still one heck of a bad card to draw. In this person's original world, there were a couple billion people, so while five thousand was still a ridiculous number of people to have killed, it was small enough to have minimal impact on the world at large.

This world, however, had a population of at most ten million or so. I just sent them a guy who could kill five thousand people on his own. And I gave him superpowers. I could feel the headache coming on.

"So much for a drop in the ocean... This is a nuclear explosion!" I exclaimed with my hands up.

"Turns out, it *was* some wing flap-tornado butterfly effect nonsense, wasn't it?" she replied with a shrug.

"I swear I'll kill that lady someday," I muttered, "and I hate myself for not doing it already. Freaking Subordinate A."

Had I made good on my promise, I would have had to fill the void she left. All I needed was a new angel, but considering I was the one who had to create said angel, it would only make more work for me.

"Subordinate A, name please."

"Unassigned, I believe?"

"...Come here. Lemme tweak your appearance a bit. I'll give you a name, too."

"Huh? Um, wait, what are you..."

Ignoring my flustered subordinate's protests, I opened up her settings window and began tapping on various options.

Speaking of appearances, why were all my subordinates blond-haired ladies again? I dimly recall making them reasonably distinct at first, but after a while... I think I got lazy and started copying them all from the same template?

The old geezer did not seem to have any particular love for blondes, so I gave her black pigtails, unendowed her a little, set her age to look like eighteen, and made her voice sound calm and cool.

"Starting today, you are Giriell. I'll make you an archangel, so head over to that world and be Renya's guardian angel. Your previous duties remain unchanged, so don't slack off on those either."

"Stop increasing my workload, geez..." said a profoundly displeased Subordinate A, who was now Giriell.

I bared my teeth. It seemed to work and I managed to extract a reluctant "Fine, understood" from her. It would have to do for now.

"Are you sure about this, though? You would be ignoring the Administrator's wishes."

"There's nothing wrong with sending an angel. Plus, you're only providing personal protection. If he complains, I'll just claim providing divine protection is part of your job. It'll work."

"In that case, you could have just sent an angel to deliver the Resources," she said, her tone smug as if she just came up with a brilliant idea. I leapt up and gave her a good smack on the head. The process reminded me that I had been a little girl for quite some time now, and the appearance was definitely starting to feel inconvenient. I considered changing it, but nothing came up, so whatever. Little girl it is.

"I can't possibly station one of you angels down there for a long time now, can I?"

"Th-That's true."

"Enough talk! Get moving already! Go watch over the old man and make sure he doesn't do anything crazy. If he does something crazy, *stop him*. Got it?"





“Okay, I’ll do what I can~”

I shook my head at the frivolous reply, knowing full well that it was impossible to ask a subordinate to show some energy when the creator herself could not even muster up any. Despite that, she bowed her head in compliance. Just as she turned to leave, I gave her one further instruction.

“Also, that bamboo sword needs a facelift. When you get the chance, turn it into a katana, would you?”

“So, finding the right time to do it will be important, right? Along with a decent explanation for changing its appearance. I’ll do my best~”

Without turning, she waved her hand as she walked off. As I gazed at the back of her slowly departing form, I mentally redirected my attention back toward the work I had put on hold.

Well, then.

The mistress-less hero was committing indiscriminate demon genocide...

Maybe I’ll just leave them alone for a while... Maybe it’ll all work out... Somehow...

Chapter 2: A Storm Was Coming, or So It Was Told

Shion's proposal to return to the village met with no opposition. Being inside a forest gave Renya no way to keep track of time, but he was informed by Shion that further investigation would result in the sun setting on them before they got out. Goblins, who were nocturnal, would then pose a very dangerous threat to those who encounter them unprepared. While Renya was surprised to hear that goblins were nocturnal, Shion claimed it was common sense. In fact, all creatures and beasts referred to as monsters were nocturnal.

"Of course, that doesn't mean they don't come out during the day, too," said Shion. They had returned to the village and were digging through their belongings in their empty-house-turned-headquarters. "Digging" was fairly literal, because there were six people's worth of stuff to go through. When they'd first reached the village, the villagers noticed that a few people were missing and inquired about it. Shion told them they got split up in the forest and had no idea where the others were.

"There's no way I could have said that they attacked us, so we beat them up and ditched them in the forest."

"Is that what you're going to tell the guild, as well?"

"No," answered Shion, "we can't lie to the guild. I'll tell them the truth."

"I hope they won't consider me a criminal."

Even in this world, the concept of "murder" likely existed, and that worried Renya. Of course, it was not being a criminal that worried him. It was the sheer annoyance of

being considered one and detained. His concern was soon dispelled by Shion, though.

“Don’t worry. Ro and I will be your witnesses. When there’s trouble during the completion of a mission, the testimony of others who were at the scene carries the most weight as evidence.”

“People like them are known to behave badly on a regular basis. As long as you explain yourself properly, they’ll let you go.”

Renya grimaced as he mindlessly ran his hands through a bag of belongings. Although Shion declared she would speak on his behalf, judging from her words, he was still going to be detained to a degree. That was discouraging.

“But man, these guys seriously don’t carry any weapons, do they?”

“Indeed. There’s nothing useful. Nobody’s going to wear their clothes anymore, either. I say we just burn it all.”

The two of them proceeded to actually start a fire in the nearby fireplace. They then began flinging in item after item. Everything they considered unnecessary met a fiery end. The sheer indifference they displayed shocked Renya, who quietly put his hands together and whispered a prayer. After all, that was not how you treated the belongings of anyone who might still be alive. As he gazed at the fire that mercilessly consumed the graying remains of discarded luggage, he ventured a question.

“Were you looking for anything in particular?”

“Money and goods. Anything valuable, really. Also, I was hoping there’d be some sort of weapon for you.”

Renya shuddered after hearing basically what a burglar would say after ransacking somebody’s home. It was a little scary. In terms of weapons, though, he was technically holding one. He motioned toward his bamboo sword, but was met with a shake of the head from Shion.

“I can see that it means something special to you, but you should really use something with an actual blade.”

Apparently determined to not make the same mistake as her ex-team members, Shion skirted any mention of “dinky” and “little stick.” Though she avoided the risk of flipping his switch, she made her meaning clear: that thing was not fit for battle.

“Being limited to only thrusts would limit your options in a fight, right?” suggested Shion.

“Judging from how he fought, that might not even matter very much,” mentioned Rona.

Shion, however, shook her head. “Even if thrusts alone are enough, he can’t go wrong with having the ability to slash, too. It’ll only make things easier. He should definitely change his weapon.”

“That’s certainly one way to look at it.”

“I think we have no choice. I’ll have to give him my back up weapon.”

“Erm, well... Since he’s a Wanderer, I suppose it’s fine.”

Rona sounded a little hesitant, but Shion paid her no mind. She grabbed a long sword from her belongings and handed it to Renya, who pulled it from its sheath and held it horizontally at eye-level in his right hand. He stared straight down the edge of the blade. After a while, he returned it to its sheath in the same practiced motion.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking it’s a good sword. That’s all,” said Renya in a flat voice. The truth was that he was very unsatisfied with the quality of the long sword. The blade was made purely for functionality and was aesthetically unremarkable. That was fine. However, to his eyes, the iron used to craft it was extremely crude. It was not the kind of sword he would trust with his life. The edge was not impressive either, being honed just barely enough to be considered sharp. Whether or not it could actually cut properly was entirely up in the air.

A tidbit sprung up in Renya’s mind: medieval weapons were meant to be slammed against armor made of metal

plates. The process was not so much cutting as it was crushing. In all likelihood, the level of technology in this world was similar, and therefore, their weapons were similarly medieval in design.

Contrary to the blade, the hilt was actually an impressive piece of artisanry. Needless ornamentation on the grip only worsened the sword's handling, so it was wrapped by nothing more than woven strips of tanned hide. The guard, however, consisted of an intricately-linked pattern of dragons, made in gold and silver. Two dragons met at the center, their forms distorted into an emblem of some sort that was engraved into the hilt.

"Damn, this hilt. This is worth a pretty penny."

"I see that you won't be fooled. The hilt is an heirloom, but the blade has been broken and reforged many times," said a slightly disappointed Shion.

Despite his misgivings about the sword's quality, refusing to use it would be rude, especially when someone went out of their way to lend it to him. He returned his bamboo sword to his inventory.

"Oh? You have a voidbox? I wish we had one."

"Indeed. That alone is enough to net you an unending stream of missions for moving cargo."

Words of admiration escaped the pair as they watched the bamboo sword vanish into thin air. The holder of the article in question, however, raised one clueless eyebrow. Shion proceeded to explain.

"That weapon just disappeared when you put it away, right? When people can do that, we say they have a voidbox. Very few people have access to them."

"I've heard that the number of items they can put away is fairly limited, but everything becomes weightless. I certainly wish I could do that."

Renya glanced at all the luggage on the floor. Originally, they probably intended to keep up their investigation until the next scheduled departure of the horse wagon. It was

only two days, but two days' worth of luggage was still a pretty big pile. From what he could see, it was mostly food, water, medicine, and small tools for tending to their equipment. Presumably, they also had changes of clothes somewhere, as well. For people like them who had to do a lot of traveling, the notion of being able to walk around without carrying everything on them was understandably very tantalizing.

"When you head back, how about you throw all your stuff in my, uh, voidbox, too?"

"That'd be a big help. The ride would cost us less, too."

Apparently, the cost for riding the horse wagon depended not only on the number of people but also the weight of their luggage. According to Rona, they did not go as far as putting everything on a scale, but the driver would look the riders over and decide on a price based on their equipment and belongings.

"Leave it to me, then. Well, I guess that comes after safely finishing this investigation."

"That's right. Even if we're only up against goblins, it pays to be careful."

"Not to mention we're in unfamiliar territory."

Shion then mentioned that while they called it an investigation, they obviously had no map of the forest. Therefore, what they were going to do was basically walk around randomly in the forest, and if they ran into a goblin horde, they won. The other possibility was to find a couple of goblins that were looking for food and tail them until they found their base.

Renya thought that there was a glaring issue with this plan: even if they found the base, they had no map. How did they intend to report the location of the goblins in the forest? He was about to address this issue when he felt a chill run down his spine. With a shiver, he brought his right hand up to the back of his neck, massaging the source of the sensation, and stepped toward the window.

This world did, in fact, have the technology to produce glass. While the one in the window had an uneven surface that made it less transparent than the glass Renya remembered, it was clear enough to see through. Peering outside, he found that night was falling, and the suns had disappeared from the reddened sky. The house they stayed in was on the outskirts of the village, so their view consisted of a chest-high length of wooden fence that protected the village, along with the dark silhouette of the forest a short distance away. From where he stood, even when he focused his sight, he could see nothing in the murky shadows of the trees.

His instincts, however, were on full alert. Somehow, he knew there was something in that forest.

“Renya? What’s wrong?”

Noticing the grim look on his face, Shion glanced at him and inquired.

“I don’t know. But something’s there. In that forest.”

She came beside him and looked out the window. Then, she turned back with a perplexed expression and asked, “Is this some sort of special Wanderer ability?”

He hesitated for a moment before he answered with a shake of his head.

“No, I don’t think so... Not an ability.”

“Instincts, then?”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty confident they’re right.”

That god of a girl might have purged the memories in his head, but the ones in his body seemed to have remained. He should trust what his body was telling him. He was sure of it.

“I don’t see anything, much less feel anything,” said Shion, “but if you’re sure about this, then it’s probably worth taking a look. Ro, can you do it?” She looked at her friend.

“Certainly,” answered Rona, who nodded and clasped her hands before her chest. The motion had the effect of pushing up her already-impressive breasts, which now demanded that they be noticed.

Renya shook his head, evidently deciding that this was not the time to be thinking about such things. Instead, he focused his attention on Rona and the string of words that left her lips.

"O holy one who guides my faith, I beseech you, show me those who would disturb our peace."

A wave of power expanded from Rona's clasped hands and washed over Renya's body. It felt like the sonar of a submarine, quickly spreading outwards before returning at the same speed and gathering back into her hands. When the wave vanished, Rona looked up at him.

"There is indeed something hostile in the forest. Many somethings, actually. More than fifty... I can't tell exactly. At this rate, there are probably even more outside the scannable area..."

"...What just happened?"

Rona's explanation told Renya absolutely nothing about what she just did.

"I just used gracecraft. It's the ability that priests who serve God have access to. Specifically, that one's called 'Scan.' It lets the user know if there are any hostile beings within the area of effect. But... more than fifty? What could possibly be..."

"There's only one thing that can create a horde this big in the Miasmal Forest."

"...A horde of goblins with a commander. Not good."

Shion's words reminded Renya of the Help Function he saw before returning to the village. It mentioned the occasional birth of goblins with superior ability that go on to form large hordes.

"Okay, Ro, first things first. Go to the village chief's place right away. Tell them to hide the women and children, and get every able-bodied man ready to fight. We need to do this fast."

"Understood."

She was out the door before she finished. After seeing

that she had left, Shion turned to Renya.

“It seems like we’re on a streak of bad luck, but can I ask you to help?”

Her tone was pressing. He could tell that the situation was dire.

“You think they’ll attack?”

She nodded immediately.

“There’s more than fifty of them. They’re not here to visit. Especially not with a commander.”

“How do we match up?”

“The village has about fifty people. Out of those, maybe ten of them are men who are young enough to fight. With us included, it’s thirteen against more than fifty. Numerically, the odds are overwhelmingly in their favor. On top of that, the men of this village aren’t trained to fight. They can maybe handle a one-on-one, but they’ll barely be able to defend themselves against two.”

“And if we lose?”

“I don’t want to think about it.” Shion grimaced. “The whole village will be at mercy of their jaws. To them, even dead people are food. The young girls — me included — will either be killed, or wish we’d been.”

“Damn, that sounds hot. Too hot for cable. The censors are going to have a field day with the number of babies being made.”

Renya’s wisecrack was met with a muted response. That was to be expected. Censors and cable probably did not exist in this world. Despite that, Shion seemed to have caught the gist of what he meant and shot him a look of pure revulsion.

“Please don’t. If that was a joke, it wasn’t funny.”

“You think so? Whatever. Who cares, anyway? Whatever happens, happens, and you can think about it after.”

“Is it just me, or... do you sound a little weird? Wait...”

Shion took a closer look at his face before drawing back in shock.

"Why are you... smiling?"

Slightly puzzled by her question, it was not until he brought his hand to his mouth that he realized the corners of his lips were turned up. Though he was unaware, he did indeed appear to have been smiling. It was not a good smile, either.

"Why? Why, huh. Good question. If I had to say..." he said before pausing. A moment passed. Then, he continued.

"When the odds are against you in a fight... don't you think it's more fun?"

The onslaught began at nightfall.

Dim forms, small and grotesque, spilled forth from the shadowy forest. Their red eyes, reflecting what little light remained outside, glowed sharply in the darkness. Renya finally understood why Rona saw at least fifty of them, but she could not tell how many more. There were so many of them; it was not worth counting.

On the settlers' side, multiple fires had been lit around the protective fence to ensure they could see. Led by Shion and Rona, the men of the village stood waiting with axes and bows in hand. The veil of night favored not man but monster. Once the fighting began, Rona would provide some amount of light through an illumination grace, but it was unlikely she could cover the whole battlefield. Furthermore, while the men were armed, their hands held no weapons. Their bows did little more than hunt, and their axes carved wood, not flesh. Nothing was made for battle. Worse still, the men themselves had little more than the raw strength of youth. Ill-prepared and untrained, they were complete amateurs. Those twelve amateurs and Shion's three-man party comprised the entirety of the defending force. They were all that stood between the goblins and remaining villagers — over forty women, children, and elderly.

The enemy was so overwhelmingly powerful that this was, in all honesty, no battle. This was a slaughter. It was the kind of situation where the only discussion to be had should be how to minimize losses while running away. Unless, of course, there was nowhere to run. The settlers' village, by virtue of its name, was located in a remote area. Normally, a few soldiers would be posted here for protection, but this village was unfortunate enough to be so new that soldiers had yet to be stationed. The closest town was two days away by wagon. With women and children on board, they had no chance. Even if they did reach the town by some miracle, a good half of the villagers would definitely have become prey for the pursuing goblins by then.

"Damn, I sure feel like running away," said Renya in the blandest, most unconvincing tone. He held the long sword he borrowed in his right hand, its blade resting on his shoulder. An ax he found somewhere dangled from his left hand. As the massive horde of goblins continued to emerge from the forest, he looked at them and smiled. It was an easy smile, calm and composed and free of any sign of strain. The same could not be said for his fellow defenders, Shion included, whose pale faces were stiff with tension.

"Renya, are you used to being in this kind of situation?"
Her voice was strained.

"Mmm, I'm not really sure, to be honest. I mean, there's the whole memory wipe thing, too. But still, it's sort of... you know how sometimes you just get this feeling that everything will be fine? Something like that."

Renya, on the other hand, could not have sounded more nonchalant.

"R-Renya, you seem rather confident," said Rona.

"Nah," replied Renya, "I'm not confident. But it looks like the worst I'll have to worry about is dying, so yeah." He refrained from mentioning the fact that it would not be his first death. He doubted it would make any sense, anyway. There was no point in confusing the two of them. "More

importantly, aren't they within range for the bows?"

"Hmm... Those who have bows, start shooting!"

At Shion's command, four of the villagers began firing off their arrows. Despite their pitiful numbers, their hunting experience seemed to have paid off in arm strength and their arrows pierced through the goblins running at the head of the pack. Their effect, however, was trivial; it was little more than a drop of water thrown into a blazing bonfire.

"All right. If we live through this, I'll see you later. I'm charging in. Feel free to keep shooting the arrows."

"What?!"

A simultaneous cry of alarm arose from Shion and Rona. Renya shot them a single glance before suddenly dashing off, sword and ax hanging loosely from his hands. His reckless charge earned him some incredulous shouts from the villagers as well, but he paid it no mind. After all, this whole defense they were putting up was reckless to begin with. There were simply too many goblins, and too few of them. Since everything seemed like a bad idea anyway, he figured his best choice was to follow his gut and go with his most adept method of fighting. With that said, it still looked like suicide, especially to those watching him run into a horde of goblins by himself.

The goblins were armed with crude wooden spears and shoddy-looking blades. The ones at the front of the pack noticed the incoming Renya and pointed their spears in his direction. Right when they thrust, he lowered his body and slid under the protruding points. As he evaded the spears, he slid straight into a goblin and kicked its legs out from under it. Before it could get back up, he swung his sword and ax into the goblins at his sides.

When engaging a large number of opponents in battle, how to breach the frontal wall of spears is always a difficult question. However, as soon as that happens, close quarters combat ensues, during which the spear is incredibly ineffective. In addition, a large crowd offers little space to

swing a spear around, and users are often forced to drop it in favor of a different weapon such as an ax or sword.

The goblin on the ground tried to get up. Before it could manage, Renya stomped down hard on it. The rest of the goblins rushed to drop their spears and grab other weapons, which allowed Renya to begin swinging his ax madly, sending its durable head crashing down into much less durable ones. He felt the crack of something hard and saw the jet of black-red liquid. As he bathed himself in a whirling storm of mangled matter, once goblin but no more, he realized something.

“Damn. I *love* fighting.”

He could not stop the corners of his lips from curling upward. His eyes, not even checking the damage on his latest victim, were already searching for his next target. A radiant ball of white light shot up into the sky. It occurred to him that Rona must have used an illumination grace. That meant the villagers had joined the fray. He certainly never expected his lone charge to halt the advance of the entire goblin horde. There were going to be casualties. Therefore, he did the only thing he could.

He killed.

Faster. Fiercer. He killed and killed.





A swing of his long sword repelled the dull thrust of a rusty blade. His ax bit into an undefended torso, burying itself halfway in. He tried pulling on it. It did not budge. No matter. He swung his ax again. It slammed into another foe, dead body in tow. Goblins fell left and right, some shoved aside by him, others stumbling during a clumsy escape. His foot came down on them all. He stomped mercilessly, driving the anvil of his heel into arms, guts, and heads.

A desperate wail. An ax to the jaw. A hand outstretched. A sword through the arm.

Time after time, glancing blows found their mark on him. He ignored those, choosing to deflect only attacks that posed a real threat. They would strike. He would dodge. And his ax would roar.

He thrust out his long sword. The blade was gone. It had snapped at some point. He spun it in his hand, reversing his grip. A short piece of metal, more scrap than sword, remained on the hilt. He rammed it into a goblin and dug it back out — if it could not cut, it could still gouge. Soon, the broken blade dulled further. He threw the lonely hilt back into his inventory and began to swing his ax with both hands.

As he hewed through body after body, the ax blade began to dull as well. No matter how sturdy its head was, it could hardly withstand his ruthless handling.

The handle, however, held strong. Perhaps it was made with felling tough trees in mind. Whatever the reason, it was enough. His weapon did not need to be sharp. It only needed to be harder than the next thing he bashed. He whaled into his target with all his strength, slamming it with his slab of metal. Be it a wooden shield or rough leather armor, a parrying weapon or blocking arm, none of it mattered. They would all shatter eventually. He only needed to keep hitting. Then, only the tender flesh would remain. And not for long, at that.

Some time later, he realized his leather armor was nearly

in tatters, having accumulated graze after graze. Finding it to be little more than an annoyance, he ripped it off and dropped it on the ground. Somewhere in his mind, he acknowledged that he just technically threw away a gift from God. Then, he decided such thoughts were pointless in the heat of battle and quickly discarded them. He felt faint sensations of pain all over his now-unguarded body. He did not mind. If anything, the stinging served to anchor his sanity. They were the only things keeping him from losing his mind.

This is... just too much fun!

It was as if a madness was consuming his mind. Through the ax handle in his hands, he felt the pleasure of crushing flesh. The sound of shattering bones was music to his ears. Enveloped from head to toe in the faint warmth of recently-spilled blood, he felt good. He sought more.

Who's next?

He looked at the monsters and their ugly faces. It thrilled him to see them contorted in fear. It amused him to see them weep and wail for help. They looked for a way out. Then, realizing that there was no escape, a desperate resolve befell their gaze as they lashed out, seeking to land at least one good strike. He saw that, too. And he *loved* it.

Where blades had grazed him, the wounds throbbed with pain. Such bliss.

Where foes had struck him, his nerves went numb with shock. More still.

What next?

What sensations? What sights? What pleasures?

What more do you have for me?

After smashing through more goblins than he could count, the handle of his ax finally snapped. He drove the jagged broken end into the face of a nearby monster and discarded his final weapon. Seeing that he was unarmed, his foes rushed at him in droves, their chance finally at hand. Unflustered, he grabbed the wrist of a goblin who

brandished a weapon and smashed its elbow inward to break it. He then took its weapon and buried it into the head of another goblin. Untended and left to rust for who knows how long, the weapon shattered after one single strike. He was not bothered, already moving to rob another goblin of its weapon and continue his slaughter.

“What’s going on, you little creeps? You think this is enough?” he yelled menacingly with his arms spread wide. A groan came from a goblin on the ground, fallen but not dead. He crushed its head with his foot.

“Because it’s *not!* Not enough close! I need more! Come on, your enemy’s standing right here! You’d better come kill me fast, or I’m going to kill you first! Give me all you’ve got, you damn creeps!”

Renya’s challenge was met by a single goblin who stepped out in front of him. It was large, almost comparable with him in height. Separated from its fellow goblins in both stature and armament — the long sword it held and chainmail it wore were clearly a grade up from the others — it took only one look to realize that this goblin was special. Somewhere in his battle-crazed mind remained enough sanity for him to recall what Shion had said about goblin commanders. This big one must have been it.

“That’s the goblin leader! You can’t fight it unarmed! Run!”

He heard a voice. It sounded so distant. So woefully distant that it was too easy to ignore. He knew it was probably a warning from Shion. Still, ignore it he did. He was in the middle of a battle and the enemy was in front of his eyes. As long as those facts remained true, weapon or not, he had no intention of running.

The countless wounds all over his body did little to hamper his charge. The speed of his steps, however, was matched by the speed of the goblin leader’s strike, who swung his long sword at Renya. He had to admit it was a good deal faster than the other goblins he had fought.

Faster, though, was not necessarily enough.

With the full momentum of his dash behind him, he threw out a kick with his left leg. The weightier frame of the goblin leader ultimately kept it from being lifted into the air, but the kick caused it to freeze for a moment. Shifting his weight to his outstretched leg, he closed the gap on his opponent and, with the palm of his right hand, struck the sword that was paused in mid-swing on the end of its hilt. That one hit was enough to cause the sword to fly out of the goblin leader's grip. Next, in one fluid motion so as not to lose speed, he rammed the leader with his right shoulder. Despite their similar size, the tackle knocked the goblin leader to the ground. As it struggled to get up, he quickly pounced on it, straddling its body with his legs and closing his hands around its throat.

He did not strangle it. That would require him to remain stationary, which would open him up to being attacked by other goblins. Plus, strangling was softcore. Instead, in the span of one short breath, he focused all his strength into his hands and pressed down.

The goblin leader's neck snapped.

He had barely felt the snap as a dull sensation in his palms before leaping off the body and dashing to the long sword it was using. He picked it up and felt its weight in his hand. The blade was on the thicker side. He had no idea where it came from, but considering it managed to stay in one piece despite being used by the goblin leader, whose understanding of swordsmanship probably amounted to "swing and swing harder," it was probably reasonably well-made.

"Well, then, looks like I've found myself a weapon again."

Renya grinned at the goblins that surrounded him. Their expressions noticeably stiffened.

"I think it's time for round two. What do you say?"

Failing to defeat him with their numbers and having just witnessed their leader killed in one fell swoop, the goblins

were left powerless against him. They let out a desperate wail as Renya took step after casual step toward them, approaching with all the nonchalance of a morning walk. In that moment, the battlefield was no more. All that remained was the bloody carnage of a slaughterhouse.

Chapter 3: The Battle Ended and It Was Clean-Up Time, or So It Was Told

The sun rose at a lazy pace. Slowly, the veil of night lifted and the sky began to glow with reddened hues. Shion watched it with a mystified expression, feeling as if she were seeing it for the first time. Mornings tended to be a refreshing time for her. This morning, however, she felt terribly stuffy, her emotions welling up in a convoluted jumble that defied even her own understanding. It was definitely not refreshing.

Her whole body felt heavy. She had been running around all night, and she had swung her weapon more times than she had ever done before. Fatigue from exertion was half of the cause. The other half was the blood loss from the various wounds that were draining her stamina. Nothing was fatal, though a couple of wounds ran fairly deep. Even she was not quite sure how she was still alive. Had it not been for Rona's restorative grace, she probably would have dropped dead from sheer exhaustion. In the miraculous case that she somehow managed to survive till the end, she doubtlessly would still be lying on a bed or the ground, wrapped from head to toe in a patchwork of bandages and cloth.

The wounds themselves had already been healed, but restorative gracecraft could not replenish the blood that was lost. In addition, they consumed the stamina of the affected to perform the healing, so the fatigue came two-fold.

She was also feeling rather blue. The sight of hordes of raving monsters running toward her had burned itself into

her mind. Whenever she closed her eyes, it resurfaced, every bit as vivid as before. She could not even remember how many of them she slew. She faintly recalled keeping count for the first few, but soon gave up after losing track. In a chaotic melee where every swing was more likely to hit something than not, she had little attention left to devote to other matters.

The villagers had also sustained heavy casualties. A meager dozen of them were ultimately unable to repel the onslaught of the horde, and the goblins made their way into the village. Some of those who could not fight locked their doors and stayed in their rooms. Others hid in basements where they kept their crops. Many of them survived, but those who fortune sneered upon, along with those who lost their cool and rushed out in a desperate fit, did not. They accounted for about a dozen or so deaths. The battle also took the lives of almost all the villagers who fought to the defend the village. Only two of them survived, one less an arm, and the other with a wounded eye. Gone were their hopes of ever returning to a normal life.

It was likely that this village would be shuttered for some time. The thought was depressing. Having lost almost all their workers, the remaining villagers had no way of keeping the village afloat. Naturally, the guild would consider them to have failed their quest, as well. While she was aware that she should be thankful to have even survived the encounter in one piece, when she turned her thoughts to the subsequent clean-up process, she could not help but feel her already-gloomy mood grow worse.

Apparently, the total number of monsters that had swarmed out of the forest reached three digits in the end. As she slowly gazed across the stretch of open space that led from the village to the forest, she found that there was almost no ground to be seen. Instead, it was blanketed by dead monsters, their corpses strewn across the earth. Wading through the gaps between the bodies was the figure

of a person.

It was Renya.

Thick, black-red liquid dripped from the knife in his left hand. In his right, he held the corpse of one of the monsters, dragging it behind him. He was, in fact, still busy at work salvaging manastones from the bodies of fallen monsters. Once the precious stone was removed, the now-unwanted bodies were then collected in a pile.

Manastones were crystals formed inside the bodies of monsters. They usually existed either right above the heart or inside the head, and the stronger the monster, the larger their size. Goblins tended to have a fairly small manastone above the heart. These crystals were charged with mana, which could be used in cities as energy sources for instruments known as mana crafts. In addition, the guild could examine manastones to determine from what kind of monster they were excavated, thereby providing proof of the monster's death for missions. In other words, they were worth money when brought back. Having heard about manastones from Shion, once the battle ended, Renya borrowed a knife from her and wordlessly busied himself with the task of rummaging through corpses and performing makeshift autopsies.

Renya flung the corpse in his right hand into the air. It landed in the ever-growing pile of monster bodies that had already been dismantled. Around the cadaverous hill lay plenty more that were untouched, and he immediately began walking toward his next body. Shion sighed, wondering where he found the stamina to keep it up.

When he had returned to them at dawn after the battle ended, he was an appalling sight to behold: the leather armor he wore was completely gone, and he was naked from the waist up. His pants were nearly in tatters, having been ripped in numerous places. His body was covered in small wounds, sanguine streaks speaking to the amount of blood he had lost. Splashed on top was a motley layer of monster

blood and visceral remains, the exact identities of which were too gruesome for close examination. It was a macabre sight, as if chunks of blood-stained flesh had converged into the shape of a man.

The fact that much of the splattered blood and sinew on him came from monsters had a further unpleasant implication; the stench was *foul*. Following a futile attempt to wipe him off with cloth, Shion had taken Renya's hand and pulled him to the village well. After dumping multiple buckets of water over him, she had finally managed to restore him to some semblance of cleanliness. Unfortunately, removing the filth from him revealed the full extent of his damage. The sheer number of cuts and gashes on him elicited a scream from Rona, and she hysterically layered grace after grace on him to heal his wounds while spraying him down with her personal perfume to stave off the odor. Renya himself maintained a look of profound annoyance throughout the entire process.

Even in the face of it all, Shion still thought Renya was crazy. The reckless audacity of his lone assault was bewildering enough, but not only did he come back alive, but a good half of the corpses that littered the battlefield were his doing. Furthermore, after being treated for his wounds, he immediately began moving the bodies of deceased villagers. Once that was done, he started dealing with the collection of manastones and the disposal of dead monsters.

The bodies of dead monsters had the troublesome property of turning undead when left alone. Those undead would then go on to harm humans. Truly, the nuisance of monsters knew no bounds. They endangered humans while alive, and continued to do so when dead. Nevertheless, that was their nature, and there was little use in complaining about it. The rule, therefore, was the immediate and on-site disposal of their bodies. In terms of methods, fire was preferred.

When the number of corpses was vast, which was the case for them, undeadification could occur while they were still collecting manastones. The undead could be disabled by crushing their heads, though, so Renya made sure to do so for each body while he salvaged the crystals. The result was the reversal of their cleaning efforts; he was filthy again.

His state of undress also bothered Shion. There was something not okay about a half-naked man wading through a sea of corpses, so she asked a villager to prepare a set of men's clothing. However he refused to wear them, saying it was not worth making those dirty as well. Then, he went back to work, maintaining his rather shabby getup of shredded pants with nonexistent shirt.

Judging by how dirty he currently was, he probably made the right call. Shion firmly decided that once he was done, she would give him a proper makeover with water, her own perfume, and a decent set of clothes. She watched him hold up a monster's dead body, gouge at its chest with his knife, and finally smash the skull with the hilt. His toughness impressed her. Even in the whole guild, there were probably no more than a handful of adventurers who could fight such a battle and then keep on working like that. Shion was pretty sure that she, at least, was not going to muster the will to take even a step away from where she stood.

He claimed to be a Wanderer, and it was the first time she ever saw one for herself. Prior to meeting him, her understanding was that Wanderers were people who knew little of the world, yet were aware of very odd bits of information, and they tended to be skilled swordsmen, mages, or artisans. Most of them were good-natured, and few ever did bad deeds. Their frequency of appearance was unpredictable. While they showed no increased propensity to show up as heroes when calamity befell the world, a number of individuals who left their mark on history were said to be Wanderers. Basically, their advent was a most ambiguous matter — an omen of neither fortune nor

catastrophe.

Renya, however, seemed to deviate slightly from the hearsay image of Wanderers. According to the rumors, coming here from some other world was indeed something that Wanderers had in common, but that was usually made clear after hearing their accounts of what happened. As far as she knew, there had never been a case of someone immediately proclaiming to be a Wanderer. First of all, how were they even supposed to know the term? *They* were the ones who'd strayed from their original world and ended up here, after all. Following that line of logic, someone must have told Renya about the idea of Wanderers, but he said he came from that forest. Shion did not think he was lying. They had only known each other for a short time, but he did not seem like the type who could lie with a straight face, and he showed no hint of hesitation when he claimed to be a Wanderer after telling them his name. She was certain that nothing in that forest could have told him about such things. That left the question of who and where in the world he gained that knowledge from.

"I guess there's no point thinking about it..." said Shion, figuring she was not going to arrive at an answer. He might tell her if she asked, but she was not sure if it was okay to pry. Instead, she chose to leave those questions alone and keep watching his laboring form.

Enough time had passed for some of the last remaining bodies to begin turning undead, but Renya continued to dispose of them in truly casual manner, kicking and stomping on them, all the while maintaining a look of annoyance on his face. Even if one were to ignore the rather baffling parts about him, his sheer fortitude and skill in battle would have made an impression. There was also the fact that Rona judged him to be a good person. That was important. In addition, he mentioned that he knew little about this world, so he would appreciate it if they taught him a few things. The ordeal with the warriors from the

Mercenary Kingdom had been a rather thorough lesson in the various problems of having a party comprised of only two females. She had decided to recruit a few more party members after returning to town, but a most promising candidate was staring her in the face. She would be insane to let this chance go.

She was sure that convincing him would not be too hard, but the string of events following the mercenaries and their “dinky” quip about his bamboo sword perhaps implied a somewhat difficult personality. Or, at least, that he had a stubborn side and there were some things he absolutely refused to relent on. A wrong method of approach could very well rub him the wrong way and lead to a botched recruitment attempt. Though well aware of her own lack of social skills, she figured that with Rona’s flawless support, things would work out just fine. She looked at Rona, who was busy heaping firewood, oil, and all sorts of things onto Renya’s pile of monster bodies. It occurred to Shion that she should be helping them, so she walked over.

Seeing her friend approach, Rona said, “The smell is getting pretty strong. Shall we start the fire?”

Shion nodded. As she neared the mountain of corpses, the smell did indeed grow more and more unbearable.

“Sure, provided we keep adding fuel to make sure we burn absolutely everything. It’s probably time.”

“Would you like to do the honors?”

Shion nodded again in response. Though she was an apprentice, Rona possessed a fair amount of skill in gracemark. Perhaps due to that, she was hopelessly incompetent at magecraft. While capable of casting some basic water spells, her incompatibility with fire spells was of legendary proportions. She could not even use a basic “Ignite.” Being no mage herself, Shion was not exactly a master of magecraft either, but she was proficient with the basic spells of everyday life. When they made camp, starting campfires and making water was mostly her responsibility.

“By my power, I command thee. Dance, small men of red!”

Her words, infused with her power, caused a part of the mountainous heap to burst into flame.





“Ignite,” being the most basic of basic fire spells, did little more than produce a small spark of flame, but it saw widespread use among both adventurers and regular townspeople due to its great utility. Excluding people with a crippling ineptitude for magecraft like Rona, almost everyone could learn the spell, and it could be learned from any teacher in a reasonably large town for a couple of silver coins.

Considering its popularity, it would not be surprising for townspeople to teach each other, but for some mysterious reason, it did not work unless taught by a mage.

As the burgeoning flame licked at the oiled firewood and grew in size, Shion quietly thought to herself that she must introduce Renya to a mage when they arrived back in town.

In the end, their spoils amounted to 116 manastones. Most of the crystals were the size of a nail of the little finger, but according to Shion, if they sold them at three silver coins a piece, the whole lot of them was worth 348 coins in total. The value of currency in this world was completely foreign to Renya, so he asked Shion, who explained that the coinage in circulation consisted of copper, great-copper, silver, gold, and platinum, and that these were accepted as currency throughout the continent. Their conversion rate was as follows: 10 copper to 1 great-copper, 10 great-copper to 1 silver, 100 silver to 1 gold, and 100 gold to 1 platinum. When asked about their value, Shion hummed and hawed before coming up with an explanation. For the most part, a piece of bread or a drink was worth about ten copper coins. Hearing that, Renya just went on to assume that one copper coin was more or less the equivalent of ten cents in his original world. In other words, a great-copper coin was a dollar, a silver coin was ten dollars, a gold coin was a thousand dollars, and a platinum coin was a hundred

thousand dollars.

The values of the larger denominations felt rather high to Renya, but Shion soon told him that daily living rarely saw the use of anything more than silver coins. Gold and platinum coins only came up when stocking up on supplies or purchasing expensive tools or equipment used by adventurers. Applying the conversion rate to their rewards gave them three gold coins and 48 silver coins, which was worth about \$3480. It seemed like an extremely small amount of money for putting their lives on the line, but the reward for successful elimination of the goblins was apparently extra. That was calculated as two great-copper coins per goblin. A 116 dead goblins netted them 232 great-copper, which was about \$232. Not at all worth it, in Renya's opinion.

Nevertheless, considering a decent meal was five great-copper and a night at an inn with lunch and dinner was three silver, they could live for over three months on the spoils from this battle alone. With that thought in mind, Renya figured that maybe it was not such a bad deal. Club a goblin over the head and he would get three silver for the manastone and two great-copper for the dead body. That was food for a day and just short of a room for the night. In a way, it did seem reasonable. Running into a horde that numbered in the hundreds was a rare occurrence to begin with. Since this was a rare case, he told himself that it should be expected for the effort to reward ratio to be a tad off-kilter.

He checked his wallet, a.k.a. inventory, and found ten gold coins inside. Some rough calculations told him that was enough money to live for ten months. Surprised at how generous God was with her purse strings, he decided that he would return the favor by being a little nicer to her the next time they met.

The goblin leader he defeated produced a manastone that was somewhat larger than the rest; it was about the size of a

thumbnail. In this case, the reward for killing it was five silver, and the manastone itself was worth ten silver. At first, he was of the opinion that the sudden jump in value was silly, but he was forced to capitulate after Shion and Rona insisted that the goblin leader was dangerous enough to be worth it.

Setting aside the issue of rewards for a minute, there was also the problem of how they were going to get back to town. They were, after all, not going to get much done otherwise. The regularly scheduled horse wagon had already arrived — that was not the problem. The problem was that the wagon could not possibly fit all the villagers. After losing all their abled-bodied fighters to the goblin attack, the village was now a sitting duck. They could not possibly turn a blind eye to the villagers' plight and return to town by themselves. Their solution was to write a letter to the guild requesting the dispatch of soldiers to escort the villagers back to town and send it off with the horse wagon.

The process turned out to be unexpectedly difficult. By the time three empty horse wagons arrived at the village with about a dozen escorting soldiers, ten days had passed since they sent the letter. Renya had no idea what was going on, but according to Shion, chances were that after the letter reached the guild, they went to speak with the city mayor only to realize the mayor did not have the authority to dispatch enough soldiers. The mayor then had to go to the local lord, who had to keep passing the baton to the Crown. In the end, the Crown probably said no.

While that might sound terribly cruel, when seen from the scope of the whole kingdom, this was probably too trivial a matter for them to care. Presumably, their attitude could have been summed up as "that's your problem, you fix it." As a result, the lord and mayor were forced to put together enough soldiers and wagons by themselves. Finally, after a grueling and time-consuming slog through bureaucracy, they managed to send off a retinue to the village, which led

to the current state of affairs.

"The number of soldiers they sent is way too little to match the amount of damage I reported. There aren't nearly enough horse wagons, either. I guess this was the most they could do," said a grimacing Shion.

Despite losing almost half of its villagers, there were still close to thirty people in the village. They were going to need much more than three horse wagons to move all their belongings. Once the wagons were full, everything that could not be carried by hand would have to be thrown away. The villagers' belongings were valuable to them, so it was understandable that telling them to dump their stuff in the village would be met with some friction.

Unsurprisingly, arguments ensued between villagers. The tension eventually boiled over to the soldiers, as well. After seeing the villagers cling to the soldiers and beg only to be coldly brushed off, Shion approached Renya with a request, but was turned down. Renya had been expecting this kind of trouble, and at that point, he had already placed all of Shion's and Rona's belongings in his inventory. There was still a little space left inside, but it was literally just a little. He was not going to be able to satisfy all of the villagers' demands.

"All that's going to happen is we manage to fit in a little more luggage and the villagers' anger gets redirected to us."

The storage capability of the inventory was undeniably convenient, but when it got full, there was no way to show people. Under the current circumstances, if he told the villagers that he could not fit any more stuff inside, Renya was pretty sure they were not going to be very understanding. They would think he could always fit a little more inside, and when he refused, he and his two companions would soon find themselves on the receiving end of the villagers' frustration. However, the cold tone he used to turn down Shion, which even he admitted was perhaps a tad harsh, did not convince her to yield.

“You can leave our luggage behind, then.”

“All that’ll do is free up a bit of room. It won’t solve the fundamental problem. Plus, I’d rather prioritize the two of you over a bunch of people I don’t know.”

“Oh... Um, thank you, but still...”

“Shion, just let it go,” interrupted Rona. Renya was surprised to find that she took his side. Judging from both her appearance and profession, he had expected her to back Shion up. Instead, she placed a hand on Shion’s shoulder and, with a calm expression and a gentle tone, stopped her from pushing the issue any further.

“If it was possible for Renya to carry everyone’s belongings, I’m sure he would have already agreed to do so. However, he can’t. So long as we can’t save everyone, any action on our part will force us to choose. Choosing will create inequality, and therein lies the risk. Renya is worried about the possibility of us being harmed in the process. That’s why he decided that inaction is our best course of action.”

“Are you okay with that, Rona?” demanded Shion. For her, understanding the logic did not seem to equate with accepting it.

“I realize,” said a wryly smiling Rona, “that I’m one of the priesthood. I’d certainly help them if I could. But right now, we can’t. Priests must never speak of help that they cannot offer.”

“Well... but, still...”

Shion refused to back down. It did imply an inherent kindness, which Renya recognized. He also noticed Rona, who was gazing at him with the look of someone who wanted to say something but chose to remain silent. He took it to mean that Rona thought there was something that needed to be said, but she would prefer it to be said by Renya. Though he remembered nothing about his past self, he had a creeping suspicion that he was pretty bad at figuring out what people were thinking through their gaze or

expression. This was probably not the same as predicting an opponent's next move by reading the motions of their eyes and body. It felt more like a kind of... soft skill. Something more tender. He figured that he was more of the heartless type, considering that the pleasure of battle brought a smile to his lips. It seemed unlikely that he had any kind of talent in such subtler skills. Still, he was sitting on 94 years of life experience, which he desperately sifted through, searching for some hints as to what Rona was trying to tell him. He was rewarded for his efforts by finally figuring out that she wanted him to say something.

But *what*?

Was he supposed to turn her down with an even harsher tone? Shion refused to yield despite Rona's urging. What words would convince her to do so?

"The voidbox is invisible. Using that runs the risk of people second-guessing our sincerity," he said, choosing his words carefully and glancing at Rona every few seconds for confirmation. "But, if we helped by carrying their things normally, there'd be no question as to how much we could handle."

"...Huh?"

Shion looked puzzled at what he said. Rona continued to smile at him. He assumed that meant he was heading in the right direction.

"Fortunately, we already put our luggage in the voidbox, so our hands are free. Nobody in the village knows I have access to a voidbox."

"Right."

"Assuming we claim that we already shipped our stuff off with the wagon that had the letter, and we only carry whatever we can with our hands, I'd be okay with offering to help the villagers."

"That's..."

Before Shion could continue, Rona clapped her hands once before her chest.

"I see. That way, we won't have to deal with impossible requests, and it'll be easy for the villagers to see that we're doing whatever we can to help."

"It might seem underhanded, but it's a compromise. That's my suggestion. What do you think?"

Renya's question was directed toward Shion, but at the same time, it was also meant for Rona. Rona's smile remained unchanged, but Shion's expression brightened immediately.

"R-Right. Then, they'll believe us about what we can't do, and we'll still be able to help the villagers in some small way. Okay, I'll go talk to the chief."

Renya kept his eyes on Shion as she ran off, her steps quick and light. Seeing that she had finally cheered up, he spoke quietly without turning his head.

"So, how many points do I get?"

"Enough to pass with flying colors."

There was the sound of clapping. He glanced at Rona. She beamed back, her hands applauding before her chest. Sensing that there was something more to her gesture than meets the eye, he decided to speak up.

"I sure didn't expect you to agree with me."

"Based on my appearance and profession, you thought I would be on Shion's side?" she asked in the same casual, relaxed tone she had been using so far. Still, there now seemed to be a slightly different air to her. "Priests, you see, need to be quite the realists. Otherwise, they don't last very long."

"I thought priests were just people who chalk things up to God whenever it's convenient."

"Ahaha... I do believe we should have a nice chat sometime, Renya."

There was a tinge of anger to her voice as if she had let his provocative tone get to her, but she soon returned to her usual placid expression.

"God does exist. His deeds are, of course, also real. Yet

there remains much that cannot be done by the hands of man. We might have acquired the use of restorative graces, but we would be fools to think that we can save every life. Those that slip through our fingers are too numerous to count." Rona's expression became clouded. Suspecting that she was recalling some past experiences, Renya patiently waited for her to continue. "There's a limit to how many people we can save. As priests, we first worship God. Then, we devote ourselves to His teachings. Finally, we must know how to draw the line between things we can and cannot do."

"I feel like there's a bit more to it than that," said Renya as he scratched his cheek. Rona looked at him with an expression of mild surprise, which was almost immediately replaced by her usual placidity. Nevertheless, it was more than enough time for him to notice.

"Care to explain?"

"I'm not sure I should, actually, since it's nothing more than a hunch. It's also a little personal, and I have reservations about saying something intrusive without proof. If I tell you my guess, will you tell me if I'm right or not?"

"Hm, good question. Will I?"

"Besides," Renya said, pausing to think for a moment before continuing in a joking tone, "I don't know who said it, but I remember hearing that women are more beautiful when they have a secret or two."

Apparently caught off-guard, Rona stared at him with a blank look for a while, but her expression soon burst into a radiant smile.

"I do believe you won't need to concern yourself with that, seeing as Shion and I are perfectly beautiful even without secrets."

"Touché. My apologies, then."

As his cheeks flushed with color, Renya nodded at a beaming Rona, wondering if he perhaps lost a few points with that final remark.

Chapter 4: They Were Finally in Town, or So It Was Told

The Merchant City of Kukrika was a medium-sized city in the Principality of Triden with a population of approximately ten thousand people. Though possessing no specialties or areas of business that stood out in particular, it lived up to its name through the sheer volume of trade that flowed through it. Being the closest city to the Miasmal Forest — a massive woodland that separated the domains of Humans and Demons — its turnover of goods and people was extremely high. Nearby was a rocky mountain, respectable in both size and steepness, that neighbored a sizeable wood of its own. According to some, these woods contained two dungeons: the Hermit's Grave, which was said to have devoured an entire mountain in its formation, as well as the Forest Maze that, despite being fairly far away, was purportedly connected to the Miasmal Forest somewhere.

A lone river flowed down the mountain and out all the way to the ocean, cutting through the land occupied by humans. It was both wide and deep enough for medium-sized cargo ships to traverse its length, making it a major artery of trade and traffic. Its water was also redirected into the circle-shaped city, filling both the canals that divided the city into four regions, as well as the surrounding moat. The four regions were comprised of the Commercial District, the Luxury District, the Residential District, and the Military District. They all neighbored a fifth central region at the heart of the city, which contained the Lord's Manor, as well as a military base where approximately two thousand troops were stationed. The troops were well-trained and under the

direct control of the Grand Duke of Triden. Their equipment was also of the highest caliber. Along with the fencing and walls that bolstered the moat lining the city, they ensured that the city's defensive capabilities were remarkably high. Due to the city's location, it would be used as the first line of defense if there were trouble in the Miasmal Forest or war erupted with the demons. Despite that, the city was not built as a fortress, eschewing the protection of high walls in favor of openness to ensure that its function as a merchant city was not compromised. The fact that a number of wars in the past had never done any truly critical damage to the city might also have been a factor in its decision.

Independent from the military, the local lord had a private army of about one hundred men, and there were about fifty or so soldiers under the mayor's own name. Both their equipment and competence, however, paled sharply in comparison to the Grand Duke's forces. The men sent to the settlers' village were pulled from the former two groups of 150 soldiers. These people were normally responsible for patrol and keeping order. Considering they had effectively deployed almost a tenth of their total number, while it was still a rather small number of people, it was probably the most they could muster.

These were the pieces of knowledge Renya gained during their travel time as Shion explained to him the details of their destination.

Honestly, it sounds like a pretty chill city.

The fact that they turned what was effectively a front line stronghold into a trade city already spoke volumes about their lack of caution. Normally, a place like this should have been wrapped in layers of fortifications. When he posed the question to Shion, she replied with a hesitant smile.

"Yeah, you do have a point, but it's been a merchant city for so long, so there's the whole local culture and stuff..."

Yeah, definitely a pretty chill city, concluded Renya.

Even the chillest of cities, however, seemed to have

proper procedures for ensuring safety in place. There were two entrances into the city — east and west — and each had a checkpoint where entrance was only allowed after an inspection of identity and belongings. The people from the settlers' village, now effectively refugees, displayed their proofs of identification to the guards and were allowed in without much fuss. When it came to Renya's turn, though, there was a problem.

"Let's see your ID."

Renya looked at the spear-toting guard dressed in simple leather armor and found himself at a loss. Obviously, he did not have any sort of ID in this world. Claiming he was a Wanderer also did not seem like a guaranteed ticket of entrance. Worst case scenario, they could view him as some sort of alien and take him away somewhere. He felt a tinge of regret at not confirming these matters with Shion beforehand, but it was certainly no use crying over spilled milk. His hesitation and subsequent silence caused suspicion to enter the guard's gaze. Nearby soldiers also approached to see what went wrong.

"Hey, what's the problem? You don't have any ID?"

"Uh, well..."

Figuring he had no choice to be honest, he was just about to confess when Shion and Rona ran back to him from returning the villagers' belongings.

"Sorry, I forgot about your situation. This person is fine. He's not anyone suspicious."

"He's just a little out of the loop. I apologize for any inconvenience."

Tension seeped out of the guards' countenance. The sight of two beauties dipping their heads down in apology was quite effective. Renya, however, was more curious about the look of surprise that momentarily appeared on the guards' faces when they saw Shion.

"We're guild adventurers. We were on an investigation in the Miasmal Forest, and he's a Wanderer we met there,"

explained Shion as she unconcernedly shifted her armor a little to the side and reached into the front of her shirt, evidently into an inner breast pocket. She pulled out a card. Rona tried to do the same but seemed to have a tougher time, as higher peaks also made for lower valleys. After some digging, she finally produced a card from her cleavage, but the act caused her mountainous mounds to quiver and jostle. Her extended battle with her attire also left her collars in a minor state of disarray, exposing a healthy amount of skin.

For the slightest of seconds, Shion's bared chest was exposed to the elements. Beside her, the anatomical equivalent of an earthquake was on display. The poor guards, powerless against the divine commandment of their gender, were forced to glue their eyes to the spectacle. Renya, pretending to also have been moved by forces beyond the mere will of man, allowed his eyes to drift toward Shion's chest with his fellow onlookers. His gaze, however, was squarely focused on the face of the card.

It dangled down her neck by a length of string and was the size of what his previous world would know as a business card. The metallic glint of copper radiated from its surface, upon which words were imprinted. The first thing he realized was that he could read the words despite having never seen them before. He only caught a short glimpse before it was handed to the guard, but he managed to see that it was an identification card issued by the Adventurers Guild, that it belonged to the Principality of Triden, and that its holder's name was Shion.

In the space under *Name*, the only thing written was "Shion." There was no surname. Renya committed that fact to memory.

Meanwhile, Rona had finally succeeded in her daring mission to rescue her card from the perilous gorges of her cleavage and was showing it to the guards with an apologetic smile. As the atmosphere grew more lax and

comforting, Renya discreetly looked away from his object of interest. It was a subtle reaction to the distinct feeling that Rona had her eyes on him.

"All right. I've confirmed that you're from the Adventurers Guild."

After looking over the two cards he was given, the guard hesitated for a moment before giving them back. That made Renya raise an eyebrow. Half of him figured the guard just wanted to enjoy the warmth in his hands for a little while longer. Two cards, fresh out of two luscious bosoms. He could not blame the guy. He made sure not to show he was thinking that, though. The other half wondered if there was some other reason for the guard's pause.

"He's called Renya. We'll be his guarantors for now. We'll be taking him to the Adventurers Guild to get him registered and have his card made."

"I see. Try to get that done as soon as possible, then. Once he has the card, get him to come back here so we can confirm. Also, anyone entering without ID has to pay a fee of one silver. Apologies, but those are the rules."

"Sure. Sorry for the trouble," said Shion as she returned her card to its place before her chest. She gave the guard one silver coin.

"All right, you may pass."

Once the guard gave the okay, Renya followed his two companions into the Merchant City of Kukrika.

"It's pretty much the same story every time a Wanderer tries to get in for the first time. There's always some trouble at the entrance," explained Shion as she walked at the front. "It's usually okay if you just say you're a Wanderer, but if you get nervous and say nothing, they'll obviously get suspicious and detain you. Once they confirm you're a Wanderer, they'll even let you defer paying the one silver entrance fee until later. Of course, expecting a Wanderer to manage that whole process smoothly is a little ridiculous, as well. They don't know anything about our world, after all."

"Wouldn't it be a problem if people just pretended to be Wanderers?"

He could not see the merit of trying such a stunt, but he asked for the sake of it.

"It's usually fine because they'll make sure you're a Wanderer. Either you have guarantors vouch for you like we did back there, or, if you don't have any guarantors, they'll examine you to make sure you aren't lying."

"How are they supposed to figure out if I'm lying?"

"There's a grace called 'Judge.' They use that."

Renya found it surprising that gracecraft gave practitioners access to what was basically a lie detector. It reminded him of his astonishment during his days at the settlers' village when he realized how widespread magecraft was; people used it in their daily lives to make water and start fires. This new world sure did come with its own unique blend of conveniences.

In terms of conveniences, the card that Shion showed the guards as identification definitely fell under that category. According to her, guild cards from the Adventurers Guild were recognized as valid identification throughout the guild's sphere of influence, which spanned almost the entirety of human territory. In other words, if humans lived there, the cards were usable. In addition to the continent's human-centric east side, the cards were also recognized to a limited degree by the elves in the west, as well as the beastmen and demihumans of the mixed races to the south. They were wholly ineffective with the dragons and demons, but that was to be expected. Regardless, the regions where they could be used as personal identification covered sixty to seventy percent of the continent. Their convenience could not be understated.

There was a separate form of identification that the Crown issued, but Shion said it was impossible for Renya to obtain. "Unless, of course," she added, "you're willing to stay in this city and not move."

The idea of settling down somewhere was not without its merits, but that would go against God's wishes. He needed to disseminate Resources, and to do that, he could not afford to stay put in one place. Even if he were to establish a base of operations somewhere, he did not have the option of holing up and becoming a hermit.

"I guess those ones are restricted to the place they were issued?"

"Yeah, as a general rule, ones issued by lords are only valid in their lands, and ones issued by the Crown are only valid within the state."

"That's right," Rona chimed in, "the Crown's ID is probably enough for normal people who can't handle the life of an adventurer, but you certainly look like you can, Renya. A guild card is definitely the one you should get."

"And that's why we're heading to the guild first. We have to report in about our quest, too," said Shion. She then seemed to remember what exactly it was she had to report, and her expression clouded. From her perspective, they had barely investigated the forest at all, and while they did manage to eliminate the monsters that suddenly swarmed out of the forest, the village was destroyed as a result. That definitely killed any chance they had at the mission reward, and it also put them at risk of incurring some sort of penalty if the mission was deemed to be a failure.

In contrast to Shion's pessimism, Rona's smile was unfazed. She was of the opinion that their now-defunct party members were to blame for hindering their investigation. Also, for a village that was facing total annihilation, successfully allowing almost half its villagers to escape was arguably a respectable accomplishment. Add that to their dead goblin tally, which probably reached three digits, and things seemed considerably less doom and gloom.

As for Renya, he honestly did not want to go to the guild. Going to the guild would require him to file a report, and filing a report would necessitate recounting their troubled

first meeting, during which he'd murdered six guys in cold blood. Shion also mentioned that it was possible for the guild to temporarily detain him. Given the extenuating circumstances, Renya was not particularly upset about the fact that he offed six people, but he definitely preferred to avoid being locked up as a criminal.

He could just deny everything outright and make a run for it. The option was legitimately appealing. The downside was that he would have to part ways with his two companions and head to a different town, not to mention Shion and Rona would then have to file a follow-up report about how the suspect in question fled the city. In that case, there was a good chance that a similar fate would await him in whichever city he entered next. With a deep sigh, he conceded that he had no choice but to follow the two girls and see what happens. If things got seriously thorny, he could make a run for it then.

After a walk through the Commercial District, they finally arrived at the institution of interest. It was an unassuming building. Similar structures lined the sides of the street, functioning as taverns and shops and other such facilities. Unless they were informed in advance or were being guided like Renya, someone looking at this building would have no idea it was the Adventurers Guild.

Previously, Renya had baselessly assumed that the Adventurers Guild would be a sketchy-looking establishment that housed a bunch of shady types whispering among themselves in the smoke-laden corners of a dimly lit room. He had imagined the place to be filled with men, middle-aged and smelling of sweat, who were clothed in aged armor and held weapons worn through years of use.

The place he was led to by Shion and Rona, however, was a very simple building marked by nothing more than an

emblem of a sword and staff that formed a cross, and an unobtrusive sign that read “Adventurers Guild Kukrika Branch.” Its appearance made him wonder if he had misjudged things. Perhaps the guild was not of the shadowy variety, but rather the more casual sort. Once he stepped in, maybe he would be greeted by a lady whose defensive apparel would make more sense as skin-colored armor over metallic flesh. There might also be a mage girl, endowed in neither personality nor proportions, who would sit there silently, her face a mask of indifference. Presumably, there must also exist the unreasonably handsome hero who, not content to be skilled with only the sword, was also adept at magecraft, and was so ridiculously overpowered that anyone who had to fight him would doubtlessly bombard the developers with rage-fueled outbursts of hate mail. Perhaps that was what the guild was like — a place where have-it-alls flaunted the fact that they did, in fact, have it all. If so, Renya doubted he would last even a second. He would *not* fit in.

Ever since coming to this world, he had yet to get a look at his own face. There were many reasons: the settlers’ village had no mirrors, he never asked Shion or Rona for one, and circumstances never gave him a chance to ask for one, either. He knew one thing for sure, though; he was not good-looking. Therefore, he would stick out like a sore thumb beside a hero and his harem entourage. Then again, he probably would not stick out. Sticking out implied he at least drew some attention. He would fade away. He went as far as to wonder if he should have asked the God girl to nudge his appearance slightly toward the handsome side before sending him here.

Suddenly, an incongruity occurred to him. If the girl had erased his memories of his past life, from where was he pulling all this knowledge about heroes and harems and have-it-alls? The thought made him question the nature of his previous life. Maybe he had not exactly been a

wholesome person. Just maybe, he had been the kind of person who spent most of his time actively avoiding things like the sun, the outside, and the third dimension of reality. He hoped that was not true. What a profound waste of 94 years it would be otherwise.





"Renya... I don't know what you're thinking about, but whatever it is, it's probably better to do it not hunched over at the side of the road. You're getting in people's way..."

Seeing Renya's baffling behavior, Shion finally spoke up.

"You know what? I think I'd rather not go to the guild."

"As if. If we don't get you registered properly with the guild, you'll get held up by the gate guards every time, not to mention we have to clean up the whole Mercenary Kingdom fiasco properly or you might end up a criminal."

"Come on, that's where you work some of your magic, isn't it?"

"No. No work, no magic. Now get up and behave. We're going in."

Shion approached the squatting Renya and grabbed his collar. Then, she pulled him up on his feet and all the way through the guild's door. He could have resisted if he tried, but it did seem like he had to go through with this one way or another. In the end, he resigned himself to his fate, which in this case meant the arm currently tugging on his collar, with Rona following quietly behind them.

"It's not like I'm enjoying this, you know?" mentioned Shion. "You try being the one who has to tell the guild she failed."

"I feel like... that depends on how you say it."

"What are you talking..."

Shion trailed off mid-sentence. Renya looked around to find that his external source of locomotion had brought him to a service counter of some kind. Standing behind the counter was a young lady who smiled at them. Dressed sharply in uniform, she had brown hair and looked only a few years older than Shion and Rona.

"Uh... We're the party of Shion and Rona. We just came back from a mission in the Miasmal Forest and we'd like to file a report."

"Sure, give me a moment to look up your records."

The female receptionist pulled out a ledger. As she began

flipping through it, Renya took the time to look around the inside of the guild. It resembled his second guess more. The gloom of a dank tavern was nowhere to be found. Instead, sunlight poured in from large windows, keeping its neatly-organized interiors brightly lit. It had the comfortable air of a gathering place for friends. Bookshelves held rows of written texts, and mission slips were pinned to bulletin boards. A counter provided light snacks for visitors who might be waiting for companions to arrive, and a number of dining tables were available for their needs. There was little else worthy of mention.

His concern about heroes and harems seem to have been misplaced. The people moving about inside were a balanced mix of veterans in well-worn leathers and youngsters whose equipment still shone like new. Even the gender distribution proved to be fairly equal, but women ultimately had a slight edge owing to their prevalence among the guild staff.

“Let’s see, uh... The Miasmal Forest Investigation Quest, right? The records show eight people accepted the quest. Is that correct?”

“Yeah, about that... That’ll probably need a report, too, but...”

Shion minced her words in a way that suggested she would rather not speak about the matter. Seeing her reluctance, the receptionist paused and thought for a moment before saying, “I assume you ran into some trouble? I’ll have a room prepared for you in the back, then. You can talk there.”

“Okay. Also, this person is involved, too. I’d like for him to come with us, but before that, can you register him with the guild?”

With his collar still in her hand, she brandished Renya before the girl. It was very much the way one would display a kitten for an onlooker. The gesture felt unnecessary to him. He was certainly not going to run away after coming this far. Nevertheless, he did not protest his pet-like treatment.

"Hey," he said, putting one hand up, "good day to you."

"Good day to you, too, though you seem to be having a rather rough one, don't you?" remarked the girl. She did not bat an eye. Renya was impressed. This girl was a pro. It also occurred to him that this whole time, she had not ceased smiling even once.

"He's supposed to be a Wanderer. According to him, anyway."

"Is that so? How extraordinary."

The receptionist spoke with a tone of surprise, but it did not show through in her expression. Renya began to worry that maybe the whole Wanderer situation was not that extraordinary, and people were actually drifting into this world all the time. He remembered nothing about his previous world, but he would rather not run into someone he once knew. He hoped to God nothing like that would ever happen. Then, he did a mental undo and hoped to something else. If anyone heard his prayers, it was not going to be that girl.

With swift, practiced motions, the receptionist returned the ledger book to its place under the counter and produced from there a different piece of paper.

"This is the registration form."

Renya gently removed Shion's hand from his collar and picked the paper up. A quick skim revealed that it was a pretty simple form. There were spaces for his name, gender, and age, as well an oath, which declared that he would follow guild rules to the best of his ability. That was all.

"Pretty short form, isn't it?"

"By necessity. It's not like we can get people to write down anything more complicated. If we could, they wouldn't be here in the first place. We *are* talking about adventurers here," said the girl with a grin.

Renya considered her statement. Admittedly, "professional adventurer" had a nice ring to it, but it was not exactly the kind of job that would make people's parents

proud. Or even local law enforcement.

“We do stuff like investigations, too, you know...”

“Rules,” Renya said, disregarding the salty remark of his companion, “are to be followed to the best of my ability, huh. Is that really good enough?”

The receptionist nodded, so he proceeded to write down his name, phonetically spelling out “Renya Kunugi” in the local script. For his age, he just went with eighteen, and his filled in his gender as male. A gasp escaped Rona as she peeked at the “Age” column on the sheet. He made no response. She probably thought him to be much older. Not exactly a compliment, but not something he could complain about either. He was, after all, 94 years old in actuality.

“We can’t make you always follow the rules, anyway.”

The receptionist proceeded to give them a quick history lesson. Apparently, back when the Adventurers Guild was first created, there was a push to enforce its rather long list of rules. However, that left them constantly apprehending adventurers who broke the rules. It reached the point where they could not even get any regular work done. Eventually, they began shaving off rules here and there, and the end result was what Renya saw before him. Mildly surprised by the generous stance of the organization, Renya read over the rules one by one. There were not too many, and they were written in simple, bullet-point form.

1. Guild members are not to kill each other. Exceptions apply when ample reason exists.
2. Guild members are to contribute to the guild. Both material and nonmaterial methods are acceptable.
3. Have questions? Ask the receptionist.
4. In general, what the Guildmaster says, goes. The same applies for Branchmasters and their guild branches.

“...That’s it?” asked Renya, his mouth slightly agape at the sheer simplicity of the rules. The receptionist nodded

with all the certainty of someone who had gone through this exact exchange countless times in the past.

"That's it. Well, I mean, technically, there are tons more, and they get pretty detailed, but..." She let out a sigh. It was a small sigh, but it had the weight of concessions made in the face of harsh realities. As if on cue, some minor commotion erupted behind Renya. "Asking our wonderful adventurers to remember all of them would be an impossible task."

Unsure of how best to respond, Renya simply smiled awkwardly back. He began to entertain the very real concern that "adventurer" in this world was a synonym for "dumbass," used to refer to those whose brain-brawn ratio was hopelessly tilted to one side.

"Therefore, we put the two most important ones up top. Please obey those at all times. Anything else can be dealt with using rules three and four. That's the basic idea."

"I see you put some thought into this system."

"I should also mention that this is the form for Wanderers. Normally, you'd also put down your place of birth, religion, and some other stuff, but those obviously don't apply to Wanderers."

After entering his credentials, Renya signed his name under the oath and handed the paper back to the girl. She began to look it over to ensure he did not miss anything. He gave her a "there are only four things to write down you know" look. She looked it over, anyway. Then, she folded it and placed it in her chest pocket.

"It'll take some time before you can get your card. Your room in the back is ready. Would you like to wait there?" she said, pointing toward a door behind her. It seemed like a perfectly normal door, but as soon as he laid eyes on it, Renya felt something unpleasant. He grimaced.

Shion took note of the change in his expression and said, "I don't want to do this either, but we have to... Who's in that room?"

“The guild’s Vice-Master.”

“I see... Renya, this report concerns you, too, so I have to ask you go in with me. Is that okay?” asked an apologetic Shion.

“Well, I guess it’ll have to be okay, won’t it?” His passive-aggressive reply was met with a curt nod from Shion.

Meanwhile, Rona was *still* smiling the same smile.

“True...” said Shion, “but considering who we’re up against, I wanted to at least hear you say it out loud.” Her statement spoke volumes about how much she dreaded the meeting with the person behind that door.

“Whatever. Can’t turn back now. That ship has sailed.”

“Thanks... I’ll try to make it as smooth as possible, but... no guarantees.”

With the least reassuring statement he could have heard, Renya turned toward the door in front. His thoughts lingered, however, on the one behind him, and the mounting desire to secure an escape route.

Interlude: The Third One, or So It Was Told

“This, I assume,” said an impressed Giriell, “would be the kind of thing one would describe as ‘freaking OP’?” She spoke in a low voice as she watched the battle play out in the semi-transparent window that floated in the air. The scenes were of Renya fighting the goblins in the settlers’ village. He stood in the middle of the goblin horde, gleefully swinging his broken sword and lousy ax in a wild frenzy. The corners of his lips were curled up in a nightmarish grin. Each stroke of his weapons was accompanied with a flash and a mess of sweat, blood, and goblin parts. It was quite the sight.

At the upper right of the screen was a small row of text that read “REC.” Presumably, somebody had recorded this footage. Giriell had no idea who.

“Freaking OP? Please. This is child’s play.”

The second commenter was not impressed. Giriell turned to God, who stood beside her looking at the same screen, and gave the young girl a questioning look.

“Child’s play?”

“Throughout this battle, Renya defeated one goblin leader and 87 goblins. Any mid-ranked fellow in this world can manage that without breaking a sweat.”

Assuming the girl’s calculations were correct, that meant Renya had personally dispatched eighty percent of the goblins that came out of the Miasmal Forest and attacked the settlers’ village. Of course, there was not much point in assuming. The girl in question was not going to lie. Whatever she said was probably true. Still, for one single

human, it seemed like an impressive achievement. If anything, the residents of that world were the ones with the problem, considering any mid-ranked person could perform the same feat without breaking a sweat. Of course, had it been Giriell in that scenario, she could have instantly vaporized every single goblin even if their numbers had three more zeroes at the end. That, however, would be comparing apples and oranges.

“He didn’t even use magecraft, not to mention any of the skills I gave him. His weapons were junk, too. First of all, based on Renya’s fighting ability in his previous world, he should have annihilated them easily. This was too slow. And too rough. The memory wipe must have also erased some of his battle experience. Probably should have pulled back a little on that.”

As the girl voiced her grievances, Giriell made an effort to remain silent and not mention that both the weapons and the memories were the girl’s fault to begin with. For her part, according to the data she had on Renya, Giriell was pretty sure that the “Super Regen” skill alone should have allowed him to brute force his way through a hundred goblins.

“Super Regen” was a skill that allowed users to recover stamina and heal their wounds dozens of times faster than normal people. While it was a passive skill, meaning it was always effective to a certain degree, in order for it to unleash its full potential, the user actually had to consciously activate it. The concept of “using” a skill was foreign to Renya, so in his case, the skill was merely on a slow simmer.

“On the topic of weapons, Giriell. I do believe I tasked you with solving that problem?”

The girl glared at her, and Giriell immediately felt herself break out in a cold sweat. She made no indication of it, though, and only bowed her head.

“I apologize. I have yet to find a good opportunity.” She could not imagine what would even constitute a good opportunity, but she kept that to herself.

"Hmph. Fine. But don't take too long, okay? We're gonna be in some serious doo-doo if he dies. I'd rather not have that happen because his weapon was crap."

"Yes, I'll do what I can. With that said, though..." Giriel tried to change the topic as the events displayed in the semi-transparent window switched from the battle to the entrance of a city somewhere. She was certainly not dragging her feet, and she did not need to be constantly reminded to do her job. "Things look like they're going pretty smoothly."

"There aren't a whole lot of Wanderers in this world, but they're not that rare either. They're like, mediocre-rare. And that's where the problem lies," sighed the girl as they watched Renya's trouble with the guards at the city entrance and the subsequent resolution by his female companions. It was true that people's reactions to him, a person who was literally not of their world, were more "Oh, cool, you don't see that every day" than "Oh my God I can't even believe what I'm seeing right now." Mild surprise, rather than outright stupefaction.

"The problem, you say?"

"Yeah, the problem. For example," the girl said as she pointed a finger at the window and paused the scene, "take a look at this. In this scene, a Wanderer is trying to get into the city. To do this, he needs present some sort of ID. However, once they know he's a Wanderer, they let him in without one. They even waive the entrance fee that people are supposed to pay for not having ID."

The girl proceeded to elaborate on the process. Normally, people without identification were taken to guardhouse for questioning. Once they were cleared, they were given a temporary license and charged a fee. For Wanderers, if someone was willing to be their guarantor, that person would pay the fee instead.

"What seems to be the problem there?"

"Consider how this practice came to be. They've

developed a system for dealing with Wanderers. That's only possible if they've dealt with them enough to know that most of the time, a Wanderer who doesn't know how to get into the city also won't have any money."

The girl proceeded to ask Giriell if she knew what that meant. Giriell did not, so she tilted her head and shrugged. This led to the girl looking at her like a teacher who had to deal with a particularly slow student. The girl sighed before continuing.

"Wanderers who are clueless enough to stir up trouble just by trying to enter a city generally haven't been in that world for very long. Putting aside people like Renya who were called up and sent there on purpose, how likely do you think it is that Wanderers would have local currency on them?"

"Probably... highly unlikely."

Wanderers were mostly otherworldly people who accidentally fell through an interdimensional rift and tumbled their way into the world. It went without saying that anything they were carrying would be from their original world. There was no chance they would have local currency.

"What's the point in trying to make penniless people pay? Why not just give those poor people a break? We're talking about a world where people have interacted enough with Wanderers for notions like those to become widespread. *That's* the problem."

"Which means...?"

Question marks continued to pop up in Giriell's mind. From her point of view, having a system in place for dealing with Wanderers was, if anything, more convenient. There would be less trouble and confusion. It seemed like a good deal when they were trying to send a Wanderer into the world.

"Seriously? Do I have to spell this out for you? ...I guess I can't blame you, since you have no Administrator experience. The point is, it tells you how often Wanderers

are falling into this world. Which means rifts are opening up all the time. Which is evidence of how unstable this world has become.” The girl waved her arm and the window disappeared. She then scratched furiously at her head before continuing ominously, “Do you remember seeing any ‘Wanderers for Dummies’ guides in Renya’s original world? No, right? That shows there aren’t any stability problems with the world.”

“True.”

“As for this world, the Administrators should have noticed this phenomenon already. They’ve noticed, but they’re still not doing anything about it. Or maybe they don’t even consider it a serious problem. And that’s definitely a very serious problem.”

“I suppose that means the Resource depletion will continue?”

That was beyond the extent of Giriell’s responsibilities, so she knew very few details. Unsure whether it was appropriate for her to ask further, she hesitated for a few moments before posing the question. She was surprised to find that the girl answered frankly, apparently having no intention of withholding any information.

“The absolute number of souls we can lose is dropping, so the trend is heading downwards, but as long as the depletion continues, it’s bound to dry up eventually.”

“That’s terrible. I’m so sorry to hear that.”

She was not. To Giriell, that was very much someone else’s problem. She had no vested interest in the world Renya was sent to and did not particularly care if it ended up imploding. However, she could not think of anything else appropriate to say. The girl, upon hearing her supposed condolences, stopped scratching at her head and crossed her arms.

“It *is* terrible, but I guess *some* people don’t care as much, do they?”

Giriell panicked a little at the girl’s bitter glare, fearing

that her true thoughts were being read, but she maintained her composure and kept a neutral expression. While her lifespan was a mere rounding error away from zero when compared to the girl's, for an angel, she had seen her fair share of years. She could crush any human at the poker face game.

Seeing that her persistent glaring was ineffective at eliciting a reaction out of Giriell, the girl hummed petulantly through her nose.

"You're no fun..."

"A few millennia of life tends to grind the fun right out of you," replied the angel in a dull, emotionless voice. The girl tsked and stopped staring.

"Anyway, the only thing we can do for now is to wait and watch. We'll have to see how much self-mending this world can do with the Resources Renya is distributing."

"What are the chances it'll fix itself?"

"Close to zero. But not zero. Even if things went well, it would probably just keep the status quo for a few decades. If things went badly, the world'll probably go before Renya does."

"In that case, do I have permission to save at least Renya?" asked Giriell. Her expression was serious. She knew it was a mean question, but she had to ask. As the Administrator to end all Administrators — a Superadmin, if you will — the girl could not, and would not, give preferential treatment to any single entity. Still, she was the one who had sent Renya to that world. Could she look him in the face and, with the world perishing as they spoke, tell him to perish with it, as well? Giriell was betting no. Even for God, that had to be too much. If the girl truly did stoop so low as to utter such a command, then so be it. It would put many things into perspective.

"Yes, you do."

Her answer was short and swift.

Satisfied, Giriell felt her expression soften. She gracefully

lowered her head, bowing deep to hide her face from the girl.

“Understood. The Lord’s will is my command.”

With those parting words, the angel’s form began to fade slowly before disappearing completely from view. The girl watched until Giriel’s presence was fully gone. Then, she waited some more. After a long time, she threw her head back and murmured at the sky.

“She sure checkmated me there... Maybe I shouldn’t have given her a name... That’s definitely a budding sense of free will... Man, maybe I really should have thought this through more.”

The angels had no names of their own. This was a decision made partly because she was too lazy to go to each of her angels and give her a name. There were a couple hundred million of them. That would be insane. More importantly, however, a name was critical in the formation of a sense of self. That was why she gave names to all those beings who had roles to fill, including Giriel, the angel she tasked with watching over Renya. It was also why Giriel seemed to be developing a sense of self, and that was the cause of much headache for the girl.

“Well, then... Heads or tails, boom or bust? How’s this gonna turn out? ...Honestly, who’s the one that said God is omnipotent? I’d like to find the bastard and give him a piece of my mind. Omnipotent, my ass. Say that after you see the crap I have to deal with...”

With her hands pressed against her head, she leaned back and cursed at the uncaring sky. As far as the girl knew, nothing was out there to hear her words.

Chapter 5: From Reports to Invitations, or So It Was Told

Beyond the door lay a small room almost devoid of articles of daily living. A lone desk sat in the center of the room, flanked by two chairs. There was nothing else. When he first entered, Renya felt a strange sensation. However, both Shion and Rona went in before him, and neither of them said anything, so he kept it to himself.

A man sat in the chair across the desk. His appearance gave no hint as to his age. Faint blond hair fell past his thin face and reached down to his shoulders. He was well-built with a strong, masculine frame, but compared to the other adventurers in the guild, he was still on the more slender side. His sharp, narrow eyes were angled slightly, and Renya could make out only a scant trace of their greenish hue. Clothed in a well-tailored, navy blue robe, he was otherwise unadorned with the exception of a single silver medal-like ornament on his chest.

“Ah, good to see you here.”

He remained sitting and greeted them in a soft voice. Shion bowed her head lightly. Rona replicated the motion, and Renya, feeling pressured to follow suit, did so as well.

“Good to see you, too, Vice-Branchmaster, I hope you’ve been keeping well,” Shion said as she straightened herself again. There was a hint of strain to her voice. It was the voice of an extremely unwilling speaker who would prefer anything to standing there and talking to the man before them.





Renya directed his attention at the seated Vice-Branchmaster and carefully looked him over, trying to figure out what part of the man vexed Shion so greatly.

“Give it up, young Wanderer.”

The Vice-Branchmaster shifted his gaze toward Renya as if he knew he was being observed. His narrow eyes, their slits so thin that Renya could just barely tell they were open, reminded him of some sort of snake or lizard. Their reptilian appearance sent a chill down Renya’s spine.

“You won’t figure out why those girls hate my guts so much just by looking at me. I maintain a perfect appearance, after all.”

“I’d love to know where that baseless confidence of yours comes from.”

True to his word, there was an air of gracefulness to the Vice-Branchmaster, who smiled pleasantly at them. His mild-mannered disposition revealed no obvious flaws. That did not, apparently, stop Shion from hating him with every fiber of her body.

Curious about Rona’s reaction, Renya glanced at her expression to find her features set firmly in an unchanging smile. He was forced to withhold judgment, seeing as he was not given much to work with.

“My name is Fritz Rustbrid. I serve as the Vice-Master of the Adventurers Guild’s Kukrika Branch. Shion, Rona, and I have already been acquainted with one another, so how about we have you tell us your name first, young wanderer?”

“I’m Renya. More importantly, how much longer do we have to keep standing here like this?”

All three of them had stopped walking as soon as they entered the room. No one took a step toward the desk. Renya stood his ground because he was following the girls’ lead, but they seemed to have no intention of approaching the Vice-Branchmaster. Once they heard Renya’s question, both of them shot reproving glances at him.

“I humbly disapprove,” said Shion in a forced tone. “We’re

not nearly arrogant enough to be sharing a table with the Vice-Branchmaster."

"Let's not play word games," retorted Fritz. "Just be honest. Why don't you simply say you're allergic to being near me?"

Shion, for her part, did not deny the Vice-Branchmaster's claim, instead choosing to remain silent. In other words, she agreed with his statement.

"You're not going to refute me?"

"There was nothing to refute."

Fritz broke out in a throaty, cackling laugh. Shion continued to glare at him, her expression a mask of enmity. It seemed a fairly disrespectful attitude for her to take toward Fritz, considering he was technically her superior, but the robed man showed no indication of displeasure. Rather, he seemed to be quite enjoying the exchange. For a moment, Renya entertained the thought that maybe Fritz had some masochistic tendencies. Then, he immediately put it out of his mind on the suspicion that any further exploration of the topic would begin to show on his face.

"Well, I think that's enough of our usual banter for now. Let's hear the report. I do believe the quest concerned an investigation of the Miasmal Forest, and that it was taken up by a party of eight. Excluding our young Wanderer over there, I seem to count only two of you. Care to explain?"

Upon hearing that this was considered usual banter, Renya considered the implications and found them depressing. Shion and Rona, meanwhile, did not seem disturbed. Maybe they were used to it.

"In the middle of our investigation of the forest, we were attacked by the other six people. Renya came to our rescue during the incident and has been with us ever since."

"Ah, understandable to a certain extent. Personalities aside, the two of you are rather attractive. Having the advantage in numbers and realizing you were isolated in a forest, I can see how they would have such impulses. The

poor souls, really. Had they known what lay below the skin, they surely would have reconsidered.”

Renya mentally grimaced at Fritz’s barbed comment. Shion managed to restrain herself to merely maintaining her staring contest with the Vice-Branchmaster. Behind her, however, Rona’s aura changed. Her smile looked the same as before, but it now held daggers. Seeing that Rona was ostensibly unarmed, Renya began to wonder what kind of offensive abilities were available to gracecraft practitioners. Despite their short time together, he knew she was not the type to simply snap, but everyone had their limits. He prayed he would not learn the limits of Rona’s patience today.

“And what of the other six people?”

“Renya beat them into the ground so we just left them there in the forest.”

“Oh? He did now, did he? Six adventurers who hailed from the Mercenary Kingdom, all by himself?”

Fritz looked at Renya as if seeing him for the first time, his eyes showing a hint of curiosity. The Vice-Branchmaster’s gaze stuck to Renya like some sort of thick, gluey fluid. It was not comfortable, and Renya found himself sympathizing with the girls’ plight. With a gaze like that, it was no wonder they hated him.

“I caught them off guard. They also underestimated me. If we went at it head-on, no holds barred, things might have been different. I was lucky,” mentioned Renya. No one had asked him to comment, but he felt like he should say something. Fritz nodded repeatedly as he listened.

“I see, I see. Most intriguing. So, the conclusion I am to take from this is that, regardless of how this sequence of events began, it ended with six of your colleagues from the same guild being left to die — a choice the three of you made willingly?”

“No, that’s incorrect,” interrupted Renya. Seeing that Shion was at a loss for words, and Rona stayed silent, he

immediately stepped in. Brushing aside their shocked glances, he took a step forward, putting himself in front of Shion. “Two of them were dead as soon as they hit the ground. That was my doing. The other four wouldn’t have died if I didn’t knock them out. Therefore, any responsibility regarding those six people is ultimately mine.”

“Were those two not the ones who proposed leaving them in the forest?”

“Even so, considering I was the one who jumped in to help, if I insisted on taking them with us, we probably would have. One way or another, I had the final call.”

“But that’s...”

Shion did not finish her sentence. Renya glanced over his shoulder to find that it was Rona who stopped her by placing her hand on Shion’s shoulder. Taking that to mean she trusted him to handle the situation, Renya turned to face Fritz again.

“That’s the gist of it. Is there a problem? If so, I’m all ears,” said Renya, adding just a touch of emphasis to his question.

“A problem, you say...” Fritz smiled knowingly. “You do seem less clueless than the ladies behind you. I’ll give you that much.”

Renya felt a palpable flare of anger behind him. Keeping his expression perfectly still, he shot the two girls a glance that could be roughly interpreted to mean, “Please don’t say anything stupid.” He wasn’t sure if they got the hint. Fritz, however, gave a small nod.

“There is no problem with the sequence of events you just described. Our dear ladies were assaulted in the forest by six of their peers. None of you are to be blamed for that. Then, you lent them a helping hand. This is also fine. Following that, you defeated the six men and left them in the forest. While one may debate the ethics of this particular action, it must be recognized that you were outnumbered. Furthermore, your opponents were the kind of heinous

villains who would attack women six to two. It is understandable that you would be less humane in your approach afterwards." Fritz paused for a moment to set his elbows atop the desk. He folded his hands together. "Hmm. Had this been Shion or Rona's doing, valid reasons or not, I would have had to consider it a problem, to some degree."

I thought so, you bastard.

Renya kept himself from scowling, but he definitely felt some disgust at the gleefully smiling Fritz. Originally, the three of them were probably supposed to share in the blame for the incident. Then, Fritz would claim that while they did violate a guild rule, he sympathized with their extenuating circumstances, but ultimately, he would still need to inflict some sort of penalty. Renya glanced at Fritz's expression. Probably some minor penalty, at that. If he had to guess, it would have been a minor one-time contribution to the guild. Free labor for a day or something. When Shion had failed to reply, it was likely because she had not expected the incident to be turned into leverage for the guild to take advantage of.

"You do realize this is exactly the kind of stuff that loses you fans, right?" asked Renya, who could not resist a remark.

"I have not the slightest idea what you mean." Fritz, however, played dumb. "In any case, your report of the incident has been duly noted. There shall also be no detaining of our dear Wanderer friend. As for the families of the deceased, should they exist and raise the question, they shall be informed that the members in question were killed in an accident after breaking guild rules."

"Thank you for your understanding," said Shion from behind. She lowered her head.

"Moving on, then," continued Fritz. His expression darkened. "What of the investigation in the forest?"

Before a similarly gloomy-faced Shion could speak, Renya put his hand out and stopped her. Calmly and smoothly, he

said, “I’ll report that. The situation with the forest isn’t good. That much should be obvious from the fact that a goblin horde with a leader attacked the settlers’ village. Monster activity might be growing more prevalent. I request further investigation to address that risk.”

Fritz, apparently caught off guard, stared blankly at him for a second. Even he probably did not expect the Wanderer of all people to butt in here, as well.

“Should you require proof of the goblin leader’s existence, I can present the manastones we collected. As for the size of their horde, I’m sure the number of manastones will speak for itself. We rescued almost half the villagers from the besieged village. I don’t believe that was a part of the quest, but we did so anyway. I think we deserve some recognition for going above and beyond the call of duty.”

“You rescued half of them? Don’t you mean you failed to save half of them?”

“You heard me. We *rescued* half of them. You think any of them would have made it out alive without our help?”

With a look of appraisal, Fritz glanced up from his seat. His upward gaze was met straight on by Renya, who maintained his poker face and stared back down at the Vice-Branchmaster.

“Well? Is there a problem?”

When Renya pressed him, Fritz briefly shook his head before replying.

“Are you familiar with a certain idiom? It’s not what you say, but how you say it?”

“Maybe. If you want to play word games, though, you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

Renya’s answer was short and blunt. Fritz smiled wryly before spreading his hands and giving the desk a single thump. He stood up.

“Fair enough. Your report is approved, as are your assertions. We’ll discuss conducting further investigations on our side. Should the need arise, we’ll recruit other

candidates.”

“Well, then. I think that wraps up the quest the two of them took on. I assume they were successful?”

“I acknowledge the successful completion of their quest. You may collect your reward at the counter outside.”

“Your understanding is appreciated.” Hearing that Fritz had given his word, Renya immediately spun on his heel. He had no intention of continuing the conversation any further. “All right, ladies, let’s get out of here.” He pushed Shion and Rona along as he made for the door. The former looked unsatisfied, as if she still had something to say. The latter wore an expression of pleasant contentment. Before he could leave, he heard Fritz’s voice behind him.

“Renya, do you intend to continue accompanying those two girls in the future?”

“Who knows? Take your best guess.” Without even glancing backward, Renya gave a curt answer and left the room.

Fritz followed Renya with his gaze, watching the back of his figure disappear beyond the doorway. He remained standing until the door finally swung shut. Then, like a deflating balloon, he let out a deep sigh and crumpled into his seat. Throwing himself against the backrest, he stretched out wide and stared up at the ceiling.

“Well, well, it didn’t exactly go as planned... But I suppose this works, too?”

The ceiling, unsurprisingly, did not answer back.

Two suns hid themselves away below the horizon. In their place, three moons rose high in the sky. A time of day that could reasonably be defined as evening had come. People began heading home, stores started closing their doors, and, as though there was some city-wide change of shift, a new group of people appeared to fill the void. Some were rosy-

cheeked, having had their fill of drink. Others sought the facilities that would provide them with the nighttime entertainment they craved.

Renya's form could be spotted through the windows of an inn that doubled as a tavern. Foul-smelling smoke swirled within its walls, released by the flames of candles that slowly chewed through their fuel of animal fat. Their glow illuminated a room that was rife with the commotion of tipsy patrons and full-blown drunks. It was, honestly, far too rowdy an environment to enjoy a meal. It was also probably the norm around these parts. So, Renya decided to ignore the issue.

He would have preferred to pick a quieter spot but found his hopes dashed by Shion, who said that inns were basically all the same no matter where you go. With little choice but to give up on his demands, he eventually went along with Shion's recommendation and settled on the "Auberge Fantasme de Tous." It was the inn where the two girls were currently staying.

After the exchange with Fritz at the guild's branch office, the trio had received their reward for the investigation mission at the service counter along with Renya's identification card. They also handed in the manastones they collected. The receptionist told them that once the manastones were appraised and examined, they would be sold and the profits delivered. Seeing that they had no further business at the guild, the three of them quickly left the building. It was mainly at the urging of Shion, who wanted to avoid running into Fritz again at all costs. Renya actually wanted to stay a bit longer and find out more about the guild, but he grudgingly made his exit as well. He had to make do with the basic explanations he was given, and so he organized the information in his head.

Firstly, there were penalties for breaking rules. For minor offenses, there might be a fine. At worst, the death penalty. Try to run, and the whole guild would be notified of a new

name on the wanted list. The Adventurers Guild apparently had access to a fairly extensive intelligence network, and there was a hint of pride in the receptionist's tone when she declared that for as long as the guild had existed, nobody who made it onto its wanted list ever got back off alive. This was attributable to the fact that their capture — either dead or alive — took the form of guild missions, each of which promised a handsome reward. As a result, adventurers kept a close eye on new postings and enthusiastically participated in pursuing the wanted. Thus far, no stray adventurers had escaped their colleagues' eager eyes, bright and round like the coins they were promised.

Secondly, adventurers came with ranks. There were seven ranks in total: S, A, B, C, D, E, and F, with S being the highest for most intents and purposes. Ranks were assigned based on various factors, which included no-brainers like actual competency, but also level of contribution to the guild. S-rank adventurers were more or less treated as heroes. Among them, however, there were those whose skills put even their fellow S-rankers to shame. These elites were given the rank of SS, but their sheer exceptionality meant that few people even considered SS an actual rank. Currently, the number of adventurers recognized to be of rank SS amounted to no more than five.

Renya would have liked to gather some information about those five people as well, but he did not have enough time before Shion pulled him away from the guild. He did take the opportunity to ask Shion about her rank, which he learned was F. The answer was obvious, considering her short tenure as an adventurer. He took a look at his own card. As expected, there it was — a big, bright F.

Afterwards, Renya, who was clueless about the local geography, asked Shion where he could obtain some armor to replace the suit that was destroyed during the goblin attack. He also wanted a proper weapon. She took him to a store where he managed to acquire some leather armor and

a longsword. The set came to one gold in total. He had no idea how this compared to the market average, but he decided to trust Rona, who carefully scrutinized every angle of the items before finally declaring that the price was probably reasonable. As for their quality, he made use of his own Appraisal skill. Both revealed themselves to be class 2 generics — average, run-of-the-mill items.

Shion had spent the whole time incessantly recommending metal armor to him. The things were expensive, heavy, hard to move in, and made him sound like a walking cupboard. There were literally zero merits, so he politely refused her suggestion. He had also hoped for a weapon of higher quality, but had to give up when the clerk told him that was the best they had. The longsword he settled on was, unsurprisingly, better suited to crushing than cutting. To his eyes, the ironwork was crude — the process probably involved little more than taking a chunk of heated iron and hitting it a few times so it looked like a sword. If this was the average quality of weapons in this world, it was very unlikely that he was going to find something that satisfied him. The thought depressed him. Fortunately, he was given the Blacksmith ability by the girl when he came to this world. He made a mental note of that fact, promising to himself that he would try his hand at the forge someday.

He paid using the money in his inventory. Shion offered to foot the bill, but was amazed to find him pulling out a gold coin himself. She continued to marvel at the feat for a good while afterward. To her credit, though, her bewilderment was well-deserved. Considering the Wanderers came to this world purely by accident, it was very much impossible for them to be carrying local currency. They had yet to receive their profits from the sale of manastones, so it must have seemed extremely odd for him to be carrying his own money.

After an intense bout of mental gymnastics, he managed to produce the truly abysmal excuse of “I found some on the

ground when I came here." Even he found his tale a difficult sell as he told it, fully expecting to be challenged. To his surprise, Shion took him at his word, saying that although the coins might have belonged to someone else, since the person dropped them, it was better for them to be put to use by Renya.

Too easy, Renya found himself thinking. So damn easy, in fact, that it's bordering on morbidly naive. I worry about you.

"Renya, first, allow me to say thank you."

The statement dragged him out of his thoughts and back into reality. He turned toward the speaker to find Shion staring meekly at him from across the table. Beside her sat Rona, who was smiling her usual smile. Renya brought a piece of his meal to his mouth, silently wondering what exactly he did to deserve any thanks.

Dinner was simple. He had ordered what was essentially a typical meal combo, and it came in the form of bread, soup, and a salad. The salad was little more than a mishmash of vegetables he did not recognize with a dab of salt and vinegar for seasoning. Nevertheless, perhaps owing to the vegetables' inherent tastiness, he still found it fairly palatable. The problem, however, was the soup and bread.

Thin slices of meat stewed with some greens comprised the soup. It tasted plain, possibly due to a lack of salt. The bread was literally just a hunk of dough that had been thrown into an oven. He took a bite and immediately regretted it — the thing was hard enough to shatter teeth. It was probably meant to be broken apart and put in the soup to soften, but bread with no taste mixed with flavorless soup made for an extremely unappetizing combination. Having already had his fill of this kind of bread when they were waiting for rescue at the settlers' village, he had high hopes for better food once they reached the city. The higher the hope, the graver the disappointment. Renya sighed, noting that there was much room for improvement in the local food

culture.

"So, what were we talking about again?"

"I was expressing my gratitude, thank you very much for listening!" shouted Shion as she lurched toward Renya in dissatisfaction. Her words of appreciation, carefully selected after a long period of deliberation, were met with a look of complete puzzlement. The scene must have elicited some pity from Rona, who cut into the conversation.

"I believe she's talking about the exchange with Fritz, the guild's Vice-Branchmaster."

"Oh, that," said Renya as he gave up trying to eat the bread-rock and took a sip of the drink he ordered, "I don't think that's anything to be thanked for, is it?"

Carrying the same name and a similar texture to the drink in his original world, the ale was more sour than bitter and devoid of a head, having lost all its foam. Honestly speaking, this tasted bad, too. The fact that it was served warm made it even worse. He began having doubts as to whether the girl's claims about this world's delicious foods were true. If not, there went a good half of his reasons for living.

However, it was also true that the better something tasted, the more expensive it was. This held true regardless of the world and times. Therefore, Renya held onto hope of the possibility that even in this world, there were savory wonders waiting for him, as long as he was willing to splurge. Should that final glimmer of hope fail him, he would have to have a good talk with the girl after he died.

"Uh... Renya?"

"I said don't worry about it. That whole mission was over the minute the goblins showed up. Investigation and elimination, right? You can say you failed all you want, but it's not like anyone can say no if you claim you succeeded, either."

Of course, if the mission had involved gathering details about how many goblin camps there were in the forest and how large they were, they would have definitely failed. He

did not mention that, though. This was pure conjecture, but he suspected that the guild did not even need any of that information, especially considering they sent an apprentice duo and the Sleazy Six. No investigating was going to be done by that kind of crew. The guild probably figured that as long as a couple of adventurers were frolicking in the forest, they would run into some goblins sooner or later, and an eight-person party could probably handle weak monsters like those. Some crude goblin population control, if you will. Basically, as long as they killed some goblins and reported back, things would be fine.

Had they reported that they were unable to conduct a proper investigation and therefore failed the mission, the guild would have just taken them at their word. What followed would be simple: "No money from us, then. Oh, and have this penalty, too." In other words, pure profit for the guild. For Renya, there was a take-away from this whole incident: honesty was a virtue, but at times, it could also be a serious flaw.

"Still, if it was me talking, things probably would have gone differently. Instead, we all got off scot-free, and with the reward to boot. I think that deserves thanks."

Honesty was a virtue. It was indeed a virtue to be honest. But when it was preceded by the adjective "too damn," it ceased being a virtue, leaving only the flaw part behind. Shion was, unfortunately, the very embodiment of this phenomenon. In fact, insisting that he did not need to be thanked was unlikely to result in anything but further stalemate. It was, however, simply a matter of phrasing. As long as Renya changed his approach, the solution would be simple.

"All right." He nodded. "Your expression of gratitude has been duly accepted," he said, making sure to emphasize "expression."

Shion looked like she wanted to push the issue, but she ultimately swallowed her words. Knowing her personality, it

was easy to guess that she probably wanted to give him part of the mission reward.

"Are you sure about this?" said Rona, taking Shion's side. "The reward came out to 12 gold in total. Shion said she wanted to give you four."

Renya shook his head. He had no clue when the two of them had discussed that, but he told them he had no intention of taking any money. The reward did not belong to him. It was not even his mission to begin with. He was not going to change his mind, no matter how much they insisted on sharing.

"On that note, is it just me or does that seem like a lot of money for a reward? Is this, like, par for the course?"

"You're right. This is eight people's worth."

Rona explained that the reward was one gold and fifty silver per head. It took them two days to get there, two days to investigate, and two days to get back. Spread over six days, the daily rate was twenty-five silver. That was worth about \$250 of old-world money, which seemed more or less reasonable. It seemed unnecessary to dole out rewards for dead people, but according to Rona, rewards for missions were predetermined upon commencement, so if the head count dropped, the extra portion was normally divided evenly among those present.

"F-Fine. Let's say we're done with the topic of rewards, then, and move on. Renya, this next topic, you see, is the most important one for me."

Shion settled into her seat and let out a deep breath, as though she were mentally switching gears. With the air of someone about to divulge something of profound importance, she kept her eyes on Renya as she spoke. Sensing that he was about to hear something troublesome again, he looked off to the side and avoided meeting her gaze. Silently, he awaited her next words.

"Actually... I'd like to ask you to join our party."

"You're inviting me to your party? Me? A Wanderer?"

He recalled being asked something similar when they left the guild. Fritz had wanted to know if he was going to accompany the two girls. He was probably hinting at the impending invitation from the pair. If so, it meant these two showed some signs that suggested they were going to do this — signs that he missed, but Fritz noticed. He supposed the title of Vice-Branchmaster was not purely for show. At the time, he said he did not know. Now, with the question finally presented to him, he still had no answer.

First of all, he was not even sure why they were inviting him. He did wipe out an entire horde of goblins almost all by himself. In terms of his capabilities in battle, he was definitely a force to be reckoned with; that much was understandable. The bigger problem was his unique position. Being a Wanderer, he was not a denizen of this world. A background check would reveal nothing but his guild registration. Everything about him was shrouded in mystery. He was *Sketchy* with a capital S. If a person's fishiness could be represented by a gauge, his would have wrapped around to the other side of the screen. On top of that, his common sense was functionally nonexistent in this world. He had no idea what kind of trouble he would get himself into. Wanderers were endless chains of problems just waiting to happen. Why would anyone want to be around a person like that? If anything, people would normally want to stay as far away as possible.

"Even though we haven't known each other for very long, you can probably tell that I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed. I don't know much about the ways of the world."

Renya's ears perked up. Ever since meeting the girls, he had been harboring some questions. To date, they remained unanswered. What Shion just said seemed to touch on that topic, so he gave her his full attention.

"That's why I can't handle situations like the one with the Vice-Branchmaster very well. Compared to me, you seem, well, very experienced with things like that."

Renya mentally shrugged. He was, after all, 94 years old, albeit sans memories. If he turned out to be denser than the girls, that would be a failure of epic proportions. He wondered what Shion would say if he told her that.

"You're really strong, too... I'd feel a lot safer if we had you as a companion. Otherwise, it'd just be the two of us, and I'm starting to think a party of two girls isn't the best for adventuring."

Being a man of reasonable restraint, Renya did not point out that she should have realized that a long time ago. Unless they were insanely strong, most people would team up with a bunch of trustworthy allies and seek safety in numbers. There was no way they were going to survive as adventurers otherwise. All things considered, the two of them were lucky to have made it even this far in their short adventuring life. They should be thanking the god of — somewhere, but definitely not here, considering this world was literally on the brink of demise thanks to said god's mismanagement. There was that girl, too, but she also seemed like the wrong candidate. In the end, he decided that there must be some faraway god of fortune who would not mind an extra thanks or two.

"The goblin attack showed that you're trustworthy, too. Usually, people would just run away from a situation like that. Instead, you stayed and helped us."

"I feel like that was just sort of going with the flow."

"Maybe it was. But I trust my heart. What do you say? Will you join us as a friend and tell us what you know? Of course, we'll also explain as much as we can about this world, and we can help you out, too. I think it's a pretty good idea, personally."

Renya played around with thoughts of how much he could reasonably tell her, but to them, he showed only a faint smile. Taking it to be wry, Shion's expression clouded. Rona, meanwhile, did a peculiar thing where she dropped the temperature of her smile. That was the only way to describe

it. She kept smiling, but he could feel the chill in her gaze. It was honestly quite impressive. Figuring that she must be onto him, he covered his mouth with his right hand and chewed on his answer.

“Uh, okay, let me first say that I’m happy to have been invited. I’ve got nowhere to go, so I’m glad to have made some friends. As for my answer, though, I’d like some time to think on it. One night, to be exact.”

“I see. You’re right. It’s not something you can figure out immediately, and it’s the kind of decision that’ll affect a lot of things down the road. I understand. There’s no need to rush. We’ll wait for your answer. Hopefully, it’ll be the one that makes us happy, too,” said a noticeably more cheerful Shion. After expecting him to turn them down, hearing that he would think about it caused her expression to visibly brighten.

As for Rona, the frigidness in her gaze had waned, and her made-to-order smile, inscrutable as ever, had returned.

With a gulp, Renya downed the nasty ale that rolled around in his mouth, but he could do little about the uncertainties that continued to roll around in his mind.

He had no way to tell, but it was probably some time past twelve. Night was different here; once the city was asleep under the quiet veil of darkness, motion itself seemed to cease throughout the world. Nothing made a sound. Silence entered his ears like a constant buzz, alleviated only by the periodic whispers of his own breath.

When he was in the settlers’ village, he could hear the howls of creatures — dogs, or maybe wolves — from the forest. But in the city, even those were gone. Once the facilities in amusement districts shuttered their doors, residents returned to their homes. At this time of night, the sole proprietors of wakefulness were the grumbling city

guards who were bound to their posts.

With his mind occupied by such thoughts, Renya sat up in bed. The room was dark. Each room had candles for lighting, but they were put out when people went to sleep. The sole source of illumination in the room was the window, which shimmered in the light of a brightly glowing moon. He approached it and looked up at the sky through its mildly transparent opening.

Night had teased him with only the lightest of slumber. Perhaps he was not as tired as he thought. Or maybe the bed was ill-fitting. Even the tranquilizing drinks at supper failed to lull him into a deep sleep. To Shion's credit, the inn's bed was clean — it did her recommendation proud. Nevertheless, something felt off. He could not put his finger on it, but something was preventing him from sleeping soundly.

His mind teetered on the brink of drowsiness, but it stubbornly refused to take the fall. Groggily, he sorted through the possible causes of his disturbance and considered the fact that he had yet to take a bath since coming to this world. It was not that he was lazy about it. It was simply that the habits of this world did not include taking baths. That of course begged the question of how the people of this world went about cleansing their bodies. Apparently, the answer involved a tub of hot water, a cloth, and lots of wiping. Renya was aware that he used to be Japanese. Consequently, he shared in their notions of hygiene; taking baths was a natural part of a day's routine.

And he couldn't do that.

Baths did exist, but the space required to set up a bathtub and the effort it took to heat enough water to fill it made the process prohibitively expensive. Renya knew that kind of bath was well out of the means of average citizens, accessible to only a handful of the rich and the nobility. It bothered him to no end, but he had no choice but to endure. The best he could do was ask the inn staff to bring him a tub

of hot water and use that to wipe himself off before sleeping — a process that left him feeling strangely uncleansed. He concluded that true relaxation required the warm embrace of a proper bathtub.

With the culinary aspects of his lifestyle already in dire need of improvement, it was extremely worrying that the hygienic front was also becoming a pressing concern. It occupied his thoughts to the point that it squeezed the sleepiness right out of his mind.

As soon as he found himself fully awake, there came a soft rap at the door, followed by another. The timing was so perfect that he doubted his ears. He turned toward the door and waited. A short span after, he heard another knock. He was definitely not hearing things, but he also knew no one who would visit him in his room at this hour of the night.

He didn't even know anyone in general. The only acquaintances he had were Shion and Rona. He supposed that Fritz also counted, considering he knew his name and face, but he definitely had not told Fritz where he was staying. That removed one possibility, which left the two girls who shared the same inn. Nice, young ladies like them, however, did not visit a man's room in the middle of the night. It seemed like common sense to have at least that much discretion. Or did such rules of engagement not apply in this alternate world? Was it perfectly normal to walk into a man's room at night here? If so, there was not much else he could say.

Were he the protagonist of a lighter variety of novels, this would be where he bounced up with glee, wondering when he triggered a flag with one of the heroines. Unfortunately, Renya was a hardcore realist with a healthy dose of pessimism. He was one hundred percent certain that no such delightfully embarrassing situations were about to befall him. If anything was to befall him from a visitor at night, it would be trouble.

Rummaging through what little belongings he had, he

dug out the cooking knife he'd borrowed. He removed its sheath, gripped it in his right hand, and hid it behind him. Had he the option, he would have preferred to be holding the most powerful weapon he had — the longsword — but in the extremely unlikely case that it was not trouble knocking at the door, walking out with an unsheathed sword in hand would both scare the daylights out of his visitor and do irreparable damage to his image.

The knocks ended after the second round. Despite that, he was pretty sure someone was still waiting beyond that door. Carefully, he placed his left hand around the doorknob and spoke in a soft but clear voice to whoever stood on the other side.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Rona. I’m sorry to disturb you so late at night, but there’s something I’d like to speak to you about. May I come in?”

The voice was indeed Rona’s. It was now clear that the person beyond the door was someone he knew. Strangely, the smell of trouble also became ever stronger. He grimaced. Were it Shion at the door, he could at least assume that her sheer naivety and lack of prudence led her to the ludicrous act of coming to his room. There was at least that possibility.

With Rona, however, there was none.

At a glance, there was an innocent air to Rona that made her seem vulnerable. That was a lie. She was *not* vulnerable. In addition, she was a priest, albeit an apprentice, which meant she must be well-versed in such matters of appropriateness. She, a veritable paragon of prudence compared to Shion, had come to man’s room by herself in the middle of the night. There had to be something. The opposite was simply impossible. With that said, she was still someone whom he might be spending a lot of time with in the near future. Hostility was not an option.

“Can it wait till tomorrow? I’m ready for bed. And I’m pretty tired,” said Renya in a tone that said “no” in all but

the word itself.

"It's something we have to talk about now. I know I'm imposing, but the fact remains. May I?" replied Rona. Her defiance was also clear. She did not intend to back down.

Renya hesitated. It would be easy to flat-out deny her and tell her to go away. If that ruined his image in Rona's eyes, he could simply turn down Shion's offer. Clueless as he was about the world, he was confident he could somehow manage on his own. In reality, he asked for time to think only because it might hurt their relations down the road if he immediately rejected them. His answer had been no the whole time. If companions were necessary, then he preferred those of the same gender. Women were less comfortable to be around; there were too many things to keep in mind.

That was why he intended on declining Shion's invitation tomorrow morning and heading to the guild to look for a party he could slip into. There were also other concerns: Shion always seemed sort of dense, and he could never tell what Rona was thinking. The two of them were keeping secrets, and they were the kind that reeked of trouble. His conclusion was obvious.

However, one issue remained. No matter how 94-years-old and lived-long-and-prospered and old-and-degenerate-and-emotionally-wilted-to-the-core he might be, he was still male. Just barely, perhaps, but he still considered himself a man. How appropriate was it, then, for him to reject a woman's request so flatly? He had given no thought as to his appearance when he was in the settlers' village, but the tub of water he got in the inn provided him with his first opportunity to take a look at his own face. In his reflection, he saw black hair, dark eyes, and truly average looks. Not good, and not bad. Passable in every way. He also saved the two girls and helped them at the village. Presumably, he gave them a good impression. If a one dollar lottery ticket could win a one hundred million dollar jackpot, surely, there was a very slim but very much existent possibility that she

was here to confess the depths of her love to him.

“...Yeah, as if.”

His argument met a swift end at his own hands. Despite that, he still let Rona in. There were two reasons. The first was that he deemed himself capable of countering whatever scheme Rona had in mind. The second was that he simply could not think of a way to convince such an adamant Rona to leave.

“Okay, fine. The door’s unlocked. Open it if you want, but I’m not showing you in.”

After phrasing his words in a way that made it very clear he did not appreciate the visit but had no choice but to deal with it, he unlocked the door and immediately turned his back to it. Lowering himself onto his bed, he placed the knife beside his pillow and scrunched his face up into a wicked grin. Maybe the sight of it would convince her to go away.

He waited, then waited some more. Suddenly, it occurred to him that he never heard the door being opened. Was she waiting for him to open the door? Slightly amazed by the girl’s nerve, he turned around to find Rona standing inches away from his face, her smile unreadable as always.

A single thought — that he’d let his guard down — and a moment’s bewilderment at how she got in dulled his reflexes. In the span of a heartbeat, Rona tackled him and pressed him down on the bed. Question begot question in his mind, further slowing his reaction, as he wondered what kind of joke this was supposed to be. By the time he got his wits about him, he was fully at Rona’s mercy, and she was mounted upon him.

“Renya...”

With her hands on his shoulders, she kept him firmly pinned to the bed as she brought her face close. Understandably, her priest robe was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she wore a simple nightgown fastened at the waist by a string. It draped down her shoulders, opening wide at the chest — much wider than the priest robe — and showed

off an unreasonable amount of skin. Naturally, two half-exposed mounds that he must not lay eyes on peered through the crack. Furthermore, because she was straddling him, the hem of her clothing was pushed all the way up her thighs, which left very little down there to the imagination. It was truly a very provocative sight, and Renya felt a slight — just the slightest — jump in his heart rate.

“I’m sure we both know what this means, so... shall we begin?”

“Uh, how about no? I don’t know what this means, and I sure as hell don’t remember setting off any flags like that.”

Rona’s hand snaked its way from his shoulder to the hem of his shirt. Before his brain could even process the heightened state of emergency, his shirt was already rolled up his chest. She shifted her hips slightly off his stomach and pressed herself against his exposed skin in an embrace. Her lips whispered into his ear.

“Is this clear enough? ...Or do you have to hear it from my lips?”

Sans clothes, much of their skin came into mutual and intimate contact. The heat, the weight, and the softness all congealed into a wave of sensation that threatened to relieve him of his wits. Somewhere deep in his mind, the last vestiges of his good judgment was shouting desperately, trying to warn him that this was absolutely a trap. Their opponent, however, had an equally convincing argument: “Who cares if this is a trap? Why not just run with it?” After all, what was that saying again? Something something life, something something lemons? Whatever it was, he was staring at one heck of a lemon, and there was plenty of delicious lemonade to be had. He could definitely hear the tantalizing whispers of his other half.

What surprised him — other than his logical faculties seeming to have no control over his own body, of course — was Rona’s strength and how well she was handling the tussle. While he was caught off-guard and thrown onto his

back, he was certainly not incapable of resisting. He tried multiple times to struggle out from under her, but she kept her arms and body latched firmly around his. Again and again, he failed to escape. In a test of pure strength, there was no way Renya would lose, but Rona had the positional advantage in this case. Until he figured out why she was doing this, he also did not want to resort to more drastic measures such as shoving her off by force or physically hitting her to make her flinch.

“Would you please stop struggling, Renya? ...Just leave it to me. You won’t regret it.”

“No, no, stop! Damn it, woman, keep your pants on! Like, literally! Just calm down. Then again, maybe I’m the one who needs to calm down... Whatever! In any case, get off me already. I did nothing to deserve this!”

“Now, now, keep that mouth closed or you’ll wake up the neighbors. Unless... you want me to close it for you?”

“Knock. It. Off. Stop whispering in my ear. Stop making slurping sounds. And stop breathing on me.”

A moist warmth began to envelope one of his ears. He just managed to process the fact that she had taken a gentle bite when something soft and wet caressed his earlobe. The sensation sent a chill down his spine. At the same time, he decided that the situation had reached a critical state. No more games. He could either give himself over or show her the door. It was time to choose.

“Rona, this is your final warning. If you stop now...” he said as she nibbled on his ears with her lips.

“Renya...” She pulled her lips back. He felt teeth.

He took the hint. This was beyond the point of negotiation. His right hand curled into a fist, leaving the thumb pointing up.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He jammed his outthrust thumb up into the side of her ribs.

“Eeeyah?!”

She yelped in shock and he felt her let up her hold. He continued his assault, now aiming for both sides. Before she could retaliate, he slipped out from under her. Grasping a part of her clothes, he pulled hard on it and threw her onto the bed. With a leap, he grabbed the knife by the pillow and bounded away to the wall. First, he had to put some distance between the two of them. That was the instruction from the calm part of his mind. All the other parts had already melted into a honey-like puddle of sweet brain soup. Panting hard, he reminded himself that for all the conveniences of a young, virile body, it evidently was not without its flaws. He would have to be careful of such issues.

On the bed lay Rona, sprawled lazily across its surface. She made no attempt to get up. The veil of night kept the room dark. That was a good thing. As his breath slowed, Renya put his thoughts back in order. His face was probably bright red; he could feel the blood flooding his cheeks. Technically, he could also feel the blood flooding somewhere else lower down, but that was a physiological response and therefore did not count. Feeling entirely unconfident in his ability to resist another advance, he prayed she would stay down for a while. In the meantime, he took slow, deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself. Silence ensued for some time, broken only by his progressively smoother breathing. Eventually, Rona spoke first.

“Well,” she said, still sprawled on her back, “that sure didn’t work. Too bad...” With her limbs spread casually across the bed, her body was flat except for two prominences on her chest that demanded the attention of onlookers.

Renya refused to give them his attention, lest it cause some inconvenient urges to stir again. Holding the knife he’d retrieved from the bed did not make him feel any safer. He was acutely aware of how ineffective a deterrent it would be against the monster that lay before him. A knife could not cut down a tidal wave.

"It was just getting good, too. I thought we had a thing going," Rona lamented.

"The only thing that was going anywhere was my good sense, you idiot! I was *this* close to losing it!" snapped Renya.

Rona laughed. He gave her a glare that asked her what was so funny. She made no attempt to get up, turning only her head to face him.

"A shame you didn't."

"Care to do some explaining?"

"I wanted you to accept Shion's invitation. That was all."

"That was all? You expect me to believe that a priest of all people would resort to whoring herself out just to make me say yes to that?"

"I expect you to believe that I have my reasons for doing so," she answered back with a bit of an edge to her voice. However, she soon sighed and said, "But, unfortunately, I failed. Renya, you were planning to turn her down, weren't you?"

He found himself unsure how to reply. Should he keep playing dumb? Or was it better to be genuinely impressed at how perceptive she was? Before he could make up his mind, Rona continued, as though she never expected an answer in the first place.

"Personally, I'd very much prefer you take Shion up on her offer. Is there anything I can do to convince you?"

"Why? What's your stake in this? And why are you so insistent on me?"

"To answer your first question, I just want you to. Call it a gut feeling. Look, Renya, you think Shion's a clueless little idiot, right?"

"I wouldn't go as far as idiot."

"But you're okay with clueless?"

Renya found himself agreeing, though in his head, he thought, *You're the one who said it, not me.* To be fair, she was a good girl in general. Her kindness and earnestness

were both positive traits. However, she also had a tendency to help people without any regard for the situation at hand. There were also times when shameless defiance would have served her far better than blind honesty, yet she immediately put herself on the back foot by admitting her own fault. As an adventurer, she definitely deserved to be called naive. Or, depending on one's vocabulary, clueless. He bluntly conveyed these thoughts to Rona, and she nodded in agreement.

"That's why I want you to join our party."

"I seem to recall hearing the same thing from Shion, as well, but don't you people think it's risky to have me, a Wanderer, be the voice of reason for her?"

"Not at all. I'm of the opinion that you're far more experienced than you look."

94. Just saying. 94 years old here.

He was not actually worried about them knowing his actual age. He could have told them, but he figured there was no point; they would just assume he was joking. Instead, he kept the thought to himself.

"Please? If I offer myself, will that change your mind?"

"Damn it, woman, stop playing the prostitute card every time! What is it with you and that blatant disregard for your own body?"

"Well, let's just say... a woman has her secrets."

On the one hand, that was cheesy as heck. On the other, it was also an extremely tantalizing proposal. Normally, she was pretty enough, but right now, she was lying on the bed in a way that was almost asking him to approach. Even as they spoke, it took effort to keep himself under control. Given the chance to have their way with a girl of her calibre, most men would probably say okay without a second thought. Renya, however, was not most men. He firmly stood his ground.





"Actually, that's not why I was going to decline the invitation. There's another reason."

Something had been bugging him ever since he met the two, and he decided he might as well ask now. Surely, they were already past the point of propriety. After an attempted seduction, anything was fair game.

"After I hear the explanation, assuming it clears up my concern, then I'd be open to accepting the invitation. Without your *services*, even."

"I've got a creeping suspicion that whatever you're about to ask is something I'd rather not answer."

"It's nothing complicated. Just treat it like we're comparing answers. I show you what was bugging me, and you show me what you know."

Rona tilted her head, her face a mask of innocent incomprehension. Her gesture was so natural and charming that any other guy would have doubted his own words, figuring he must have said something strange. Renya was not convinced.

"You can play dumb all you want, but I'm going to start talking," pressed Renya.

"As you wish. I'm listening," she replied smilingly.

"The first thing goes back to when we first met," Renya said as he dug through his memories. "Something doesn't add up. If we assume you were on a mission to investigate the forest as you told me afterwards, that party composition makes no sense."

"Does it not? What was wrong with the party?"

"You don't think there's anything wrong with a party of two girls joining a party of six guys for the same mission? That just screams danger. If you were originally an eight-person party, then sure. But you weren't. You were two separate parties that knew nothing about each other. That's like slapping a wolf on the nose with a piece of meat."

"Hmm..."

"Granted, the two of you might have been master

adventures who could handle six guys in your sleep. In that case, it would be understandable. But then you declared that you were both apprentices.”

Rona continued to watch Renya from the bed. Her expression was unchanging, shielding her thoughts from him.

“Continue, please.”

“...The second thing is your appearance. No matter how you look at them, your clothes don’t fit you. If you tell me it’s for some religious purpose, or if that’s just your taste in clothes, then I’ll take it. To me, though, it looks like you’re purposefully emphasizing the curves on your body by wearing clothes that are a size too small.”

“Is that how you were looking at me? How lewd.”

Rona squirmed, as though she was embarrassed. To Renya’s suspicious gaze, however, her swaying mounds no longer enticed him. If anything, it seemed more like a deceptive trick meaning to draw his attention. Skeptically, he kept his eyes on her as she wriggled around. After a while, she stopped, apparently noticing that it was having no effect.

“Are you wondering why I’m doing that?” she asked.

“Back in my world, we call that a form of misdirection. To put it simply, it’s a technique that pulls the attention of people around you toward yourself. For women, they’d purposefully dress lightly, wear short skirts, or show a lot of skin.”

“Your world doesn’t have it easy either, does it?” said Rona in a profoundly sympathetic tone.

Renya did not entertain the tangent, choosing instead to continue on.

“The third is your names. This is only a hunch, since I don’t know much about how things work in this world, but the two of you have both a first name and a family name. In Shion’s case, her family name is extra complicated. It seems like a compound name or something.”

"What's the matter with that?"

"There are these things in my world called novels that we read. According to them, when a name is long, it tends to be long for a reason. Or, it could be a sign of nobility."

"I definitely wasn't aware of that. Granted, I was also sweating a little when Shion just went and blurted out her whole name. Wasn't expecting that, to be honest," said Rona. She kept smiling, but she also let out a small sigh.

"And the fourth is the sword I borrowed when we fought the goblins."

"Ah, right. That, uh... Even I thought that was a problem."

The slightest hint of a grimace marred her smile, but it passed quickly.

"The blade itself was nothing special," continued Renya, "but the hilt was something else. Then, Shion said it was an heirloom, after which you said it should be fine if I'm a Wanderer."

"You don't forget, do you?"

"Putting all of that together, I figured that the emblem of the two dragons carved into it was some sort of family crest. Specifically, Shion's family crest. And the reason you said it should be fine was because you thought a Wanderer wouldn't recognize where it came from. Any objections?"

"Why couldn't they have just passed down through her family as a piece of art? Maybe they just appreciated the craftsmanship," argued Rona in a tone that suggested even she was not convinced by her own words. Renya, of course, saw that coming.

"Then she sure as hell wouldn't be carrying it around as a backup weapon, now, would she?"

"Ah... Right. She did say it was a backup weapon."

"Okay, the fifth..."

"...There's more?"

The smile had completely faded from her face. She now regarded him intently, her expression serious. It did not faze him, and he fully intended to press the assault. He had good

reason to — Rona had yet to officially confirm any of his hypotheses.

“The name on the adventurer card. I only caught a glimpse of Shion’s, but it had just a single name on it. She verbally told me her full name, but the card only had her first name. Maybe it was nothing. But maybe it wasn’t, in which case it only provides further evidence for my third point. In other words, she’s from a special family — the kind that if anyone who knew her family name saw it on her card, they’d know exactly who she was and where she’s from.”

“I’m surprised you saw that. I must not be jiggling them enough...” she said as she wrapped her hands around her breasts and bounced them up and down. This had the irresistible effect of pulling his eyes toward them, no matter how conscious of her intent he was. Seeing this, Rona grinned and said, “Aha. Progress.”

Renya blushed a little. “Shut up. I’m a guy, too. Moving on. The sixth thing.” With a concentrated effort of will, he peeled his eyes away from her bouncy breasts and kept speaking. “The guard hesitated for an instant when he was giving your cards back.”

“I’m sure that was because he was loathe to part with the pleasant warmth of our bodies on the card.”

“Yeah, half of me wants to agree with you. But that’s not true, is it? I believe what actually happened was that the guard recognized one of you.”

Rona made no reply. Gone was her playful grin. She fixed Renya with an intent stare.

“Well? That wraps up the list of things about you two that were bugging me. Anything to say for yourselves?”

“I’m not sure what to say... I thought I was being careful, but I suppose I was only fooling myself.” She looked down and gave a conciliatory shrug. “But to answer your questions... Number one, I took up a mission like that on purpose so Shion can learn to be more careful.”

“I guess she hasn’t been adventuring for very long?”

"That's right. She's been at it for about a month. I swear, that girl has no sense of danger. I figured it might do her some good for her to be in real danger for once."

While he understood the intention, her particular method of doing what amounted to shock therapy seemed far too risky. Renya's appearance was pure coincidence. She could not have accounted for his help when she was cooking up this plan. That meant she was expecting an attack, and she had meant to handle it with just the two of them.

"Oh, just to be clear, I *am* a knight. Used to be, anyway. That was my original profession. I can mop the floor with six guys like them barehanded. You don't get assigned as a bodyguard just by looking pretty. You need the chops."

Rona appended an explanation after seeing the doubt in his expression. The revelation surprised him, but it also helped explain how she'd managed to pin him down just moments before. He nodded in understanding. Basically, he was dealing with a case of falsified professional identity. To his chagrin, he also realized that meant she was vastly underperforming during the goblin attack.

"The fact that I'm a knight is top secret, so... Unless we're in seriously dire straits, I'll always be doing the priest thing."

"Geez, thanks... Then, the reason you can't use magecraft is..."

"If I could use magecraft on top of being a knight and a priest, I might as well go save the world!"

Presumably, what she meant was that she would be far too overpowered. Also, while it was not her real profession, she technically *was* still a priest.

"As for the second question, you're absolutely correct. This is actually pretty uncomfortable, you know... but, well, it comes with the job," she confessed as she gently stroked her own chest. Whether she meant it was physically constricting or psychologically embarrassing was unclear. Maybe both. "Question three. You're correct in assuming that Shion is of noble blood. I cannot, however, reveal her full

identity to you at this time."

Renya nodded and prompted her to keep going. So long as his position remained unclear, he could not expect her to divulge everything.

"Question four. You're right about this, as well. That emblem is a symbol of Shion's lineage."

"Which means my fifth question is..."

"Yes. Registering her with her full name would cause all sorts of commotion."

"Then, the sixth question..."

"If I'm to be picky, I'd point out that technically, the guard did not recognize one of us. He probably recognized both."

Rona smiled at him and told him that she has answered all his questions. He leaned against the wall and placed his hand on his forehead before speaking.

"So, let me get this straight. Shion is a princess from some noble lineage whose identity needs to be all hush-hush. You, Rona, are a knight-slash-apprentice-priest assigned to be her bodyguard. I don't know how the two of you ended up in this position, but being new to this whole adventuring business, you figured some help would be useful. And that's where I come in. You saw that I seemed fairly competent and decided to nab me for your purposes."

"Yes, but mind you, those are my reasons for doing this. I doubt Shion gave it this much thought. She probably just sees you as a strong and reliable guy whom she can trust, and she wants you to be her ally and her friend."

With an innocent grin, she offhandedly mentioned how glad she was that she let Renya do the honors when they were trying to figure out a compromise to Shion's stubborn insistence to help the settlers' village. He glared at her. If gazes could kill, he would have had blood on his hands by now.

"In other words, you're the evil mastermind behind all this."

"And I'm quite proud of it."

"The smell of trouble around you is so thick you could cut it with a knife. Don't drag me into your problems."

"Aww. Don't be like that. If you're mean to me, I'm going to sit here for the whole night, and then go cry in front of a bunch of people about how you had your way with a poor, defenseless girl like me."

"Damn it, woman! In that case, I might as well just go ahead and take you for a spin, then! How about that, huh?!"

"About time. Come on, then! Show me what you've got! Give me some *lovin'!*"

Rona spread her arms wide on the bed and invited him to approach by curling her fingers at him. The hopelessness of his situation dawned on him and he looked up at the ceiling. The girl in front of him was all in on this bet from the start. She was ready to wager everything she had. Renya, on the other hand, was not. Be it in negotiating, gambling, or fighting, the strongest contestant was he who had nothing to lose. In other words, this match was decided the minute Rona set her eyes on him. He was not going to win. At this point, the most he could do was damage control and try to wrestle the most favorable conditions out of her. With that in mind, he raised both hands in a sign of surrender.

"Okay," he said, eyes still fixed on the ceiling, "you got me. I give. No promises about how much I can do for you, though."

He glanced at the bed. Rona beamed at him, her expression entirely satisfied.

Epilogue: A Party Was Formed, or So It Was Told

“I need money. And not just any amount. I need *lots* of it. And I’ll need it regularly.”

“W-Wait, what? Huh? What do you mean?”

A night had passed since Rona had made her advances on Renya. Rendered helpless before her complete and utter lack of regard for the sanctity of her own body, he’d quickly capitulated to her demands. The following morning, he had arrived early at the cafeteria for breakfast and was waiting for the two girls to show up. As soon as they sat down at his table, he threw out his demands without the slightest lead-in or context. The outburst left Shion gasping and stuttering in confusion. Beside her, Rona watched the proceedings with a perfectly placid expression. The panache she’d displayed when she barged into his room last night was nowhere to be seen.

Renya was well aware that such an abrupt entry into the topic would confuse Shion. Nevertheless, he went with it because a confused Shion would ask fewer questions. He was hoping to settle the matter before she started wondering how he had arrived at his conclusions.

“I spent some time by myself thinking about it. In the end, I decided that it would be overly optimistic to assume I’ll be okay on my own. I’m going to need someone’s help.”

“O-Okay...”

“However, being a Wanderer, I know next to nothing about this world. I’m not brimming with talent either, and I have no friends. Under these circumstances, it’ll take an immense amount of effort to find the friends I’ll need to

make money.”

“I... I guess so,” replied Shion. In her daze, a stuttered affirmation was the most she could manage. She was barely managing to keep up with the quick pace of the conversation.

“Therefore, the offer you made yesterday is extremely appealing, and in fact, I’m thinking of accepting your invitation. That leaves us with one last condition you have to accept, which is that my primary objective is making money. If you’re okay with that, then we have ourselves a deal. What do you say?”

“U-Um... Huh?” When prompted for an answer, Shion went into full panic mode.

“What exactly is the purpose of making all this money?” interrupted Rona. At a glance, it seemed like she was giving Shion some time to think, but her true aim was to subtly redirect the conversation toward what Renya intendeds to use the money on. It was a convenient change of topic for him, but it was separately and equally convenient for her.

You wily witch, he thought as he tried to convey his disgust through his glare. *You foxy fraudster*. Eventually, he had to turn back to Shion, who was waiting for his answer.

“I need a foothold. A home base of sorts. Specifically, I want a house with a workshop attached. It has to be the kind of place where I can really work on something and not disturb anyone else.”

“And why might that be?”

“The circumstances at the settlers’ village being what they were, I just had to put up with it. But now we’re back in the city and there are still too many things that I can’t stand. The city isn’t going to change to please me, though, so I want a space to myself where I can fix those problems.”

“A stand-alone home with a fair bit of land, huh. Add in a workshop and it’ll probably cost you around a platinum.”

Rona seemed to be commenting on Renya’s demands, but she was also discreetly informing him and Shion of the

market price without sounding unnatural. It went without saying that he had no idea of the cost, but Shion was probably also clueless about how much money would be required to fulfill his wish.

"Well, we can look into the price later, but that's the gist of my reply. So?"

"H-Huh? Um... uh, right. Hmm..."

Shion had yet to recover from his rapid-fire demands, but put on the spot, she took only a moment to think before nodding.

"All right. Good idea. I would have been fine with just making a living, but we'll aim for buying a house, then. It'll be good motivation to work, too."

"Buying the house is *my* goal, by the way..."

"Saving up a platinum by yourself is really hard, though. Since we're going to be in this together, why don't we just make that the home base for our party?" said Shion, as though it were the simplest answer in the world.

Speechless, Renya looked to Rona, who immediately averted her gaze.

What happened to making her more aware of danger, huh?

Even he knew he should not be blaming Rona, but he continued to gripe at her with his gaze. He could not do it to Shion, after all. Who else was he supposed to complain to? Rona, for her part, kept her eyes steadfastly trained on things that were not him. Eventually, he gave up and turned back to Shion, choosing his words carefully before he spoke.

"Okay, look. I assume you're old enough to understand what it means when a man and a woman live together under the same roof, right?"

"What's wrong with that? We're going to be good friends. It'll be a family, right?"

A couple of descriptors flashed through Renya's mind: innocent to the core, needs more sex ed, clueless about her own beauty, and hopelessly trusting of others. While she

was completely different from Rona, she was also a handful. For the second time in 24 hours, he felt like raising his hands in surrender. It was likely that she would have to be put in a serious incident that went almost all the way — or maybe just a teeny bit past — before she would learn.

“...Whatever. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, I guess.”

Procrastination. Man’s best friend. Or maybe worst enemy. Who knows? That could be figured out later.

“Huh? I’m not sure what you mean. Anyway, making money will be our main goal, right? That’s no problem. I’ll help out, too. Is that okay for you?”

There was a distinct decrescendo to her voice toward the end. She looked up at Renya nervously. Meanwhile, Rona was doing that freaky thing where she was smiling with everything but her eyes again. The intent was clear: “Say no now, and you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

“Well, it’s hard to tell if everything will work out, but let’s say yes for the time being.”

He had barely finished speaking when Shion leapt out of her seat and took his hands in hers. She shook them up and down, beaming.

“Yes! You said yes! Thank you, Renya! I’m sure we’ll be the best of friends!”

“Huh? Oh, uh, sure?”





This time, it was Renya who could not keep up with Shion's sudden exuberance. Shion paid him no mind as she worked herself into a frenzy of enthusiasm.

"You're a lifesaver! The whole night, I was worrying about what I'd do if you said no. I'd have to start approaching strangers, maybe go to the guild and ask every single man there if they'll join my party..."

"Okay, you'd just be annoying people if you did that..."

He tried to mention that they would take her invitation to mean something else, but she was no longer listening.

"I'm so glad you said yes... It really means a lot to me. This way, I get to keep adventuring, and it solves the issue at home, too. I won't have to worry about them dragging me ba—"

"Shion?!"

Having heard something that finally crossed the line, Rona jumped up and slammed her hand over Shion's mouth. With Renya's hands still in hers and Rona's hand over her mouth, Shion's eyes went wide as she realized what she had done. Renya smiled awkwardly, trying very hard to not yell.

How the hell am I supposed to smooth this one over?!

His head hurt. Shion was way too close for him to pretend to not have heard.

Were he an aurally-challenged protagonist of a romcom, he would simply act as if he did not hear. Unfortunately, he was not in a romcom, nor was he an actor. And he definitely was not hard of hearing. On the other hand, what he heard was undoubtedly the kind of thing that would immediately raise suspicions. Time slowed to a crawl as he frantically scrambled for a way out. With the gears in his head spinning in overdrive, he squeezed out more brain juices than he had ever done before, and after a long second, he spoke.

"What was that about a dragon?"

"Huh?"

Both girls raised their voices in concert.

Okay. Don't laugh. Don't sweat. Don't make a scene. Just

keep everything nice and under control.

He heard something he was not supposed to hear, and he could not pretend he did not hear. That left him with only one option; he had to sell them on his mishearing. Trying his hardest to sound puzzled, he slowly worked through his thoughts out loud.

“Uh... Well, you said something about home and dragons. What, you keep one as a pet or something?”

“Wh-What? No, of course not. There’s no dragons...”

“You must have heard wrong, Renya. Right, Shion?”

“Yeah, it must be just you, Renya. I didn’t say a thing.”

“Really? Huh, I guess it’s just me, then. Sorry.”

Putting on his best I-could-have-sworn-I-heard impression, he scrunched up his face into a frown and made conspicuous thinking noises. All the while, he kept his gaze wandering from one point on the ceiling to another, making sure to avoid Shion in the middle. Otherwise, he feared that he might see something he was not supposed to see next. Ultimately, he could avert the focus of his vision, but he could not shut off its peripheries. As he expected, out of the corner of his eyes, he spotted a flustered Shion, wide, nervous eyes flitting about on her reddened visage. Drops of sweat rolled down her forehead. Rona rushed to dab them away with a handkerchief. At the same time, she whispered something in Shion’s ear, making sure her voice was soft enough for Renya to be out of earshot.

All things considered, it was perfectly understandable for Shion to be nervous about whether or not Renya was going to join their party. That was fine. Being overwhelmed by relief and blabbing all her secrets to everyone, however, was not fine. In the end, all she really did was transfer her nervousness to Renya, who began desperately hoping he would not regret his decision to join the party today.

Chapter 0: On a Certain Day, in a Certain Time, at a Certain Place, or So It Was Told

There is a story about the princess of a certain kingdom. About her meeting with a visitor from another world. And about how their escapades led to them barging straight into an epic battle that drew in the hero, the demon lord, and even the gods high above.

This is not that story.

This story... happened just a little bit before.

Known as the bulwark of the human kingdoms, the Principality of Triden lay at the western end of the human territories. Among all its cities of at least medium size, the Merchant City of Kukrika was again westernmost. With a population of approximately ten thousand, it stood as a city of reasonably large scale. Due to its unique position on the map, however, a considerable amount of traffic was constantly crossing its borders. At any given time, it was likely that the number of visitors in the city outnumbered the locals.

To call the city lively, while technically accurate, would also be slightly euphemistic. After all, its bustling streets accordingly implied the presence of many shadier folks who gained entrance through less than proper means. While the perpetual presence of a large number of guards at the city's entrances, coupled with tough inspections, greatly limited the number of dangerous or suspicious people who entered or exited, no inspection was perfect. There were always

oversights or loopholes, and the issue was a never-ending source of headaches for the local police force.

Off to the side of the city, away from its central street, was Shion. She wore a white, robe-like shirt, tucked into a pair of puffy black trousers that was long and dress-like (similar to what one would call a “hakama” in Renya’s home world). She stood amidst an air of boredom.

As the population of a city grew, more entertainment facilities would spring up to meet the extra demand. Such facilities tended to be open during evening hours and were often the likes of taverns, drinkeries, and other establishments of a decidedly more adult tilt. However, the cities in the Principality of Triden shared an odd quirk: they all contained many facilities that entertained women during the day. Whether this reflected the tastes of the ruling class or was due to other reasons, Shion did not know. In any case, the store that stood before her was one of those female-oriented locations.

For a female-oriented location, however, the store’s decorations were on the blander side with darker colors dominating its palette. Shion searched through the rather empty recesses of her mind and pieced together the few bits of wisdom she had. She came to the conclusion that the store’s design was meant to enhance its sense of mystery and secrecy. Probably. Then, after taking another look and carefully scrutinizing its appearance, she shrugged.

Personally, Shion thought the store’s design was an utter failure.

She was not the type to comment on other people’s tastes. Being well aware of the diversity in people’s preferences, she had no intention of claiming her own opinion to be the singular truth. Plenty of people probably liked how it looked. For her, however, cheesy places like these always felt like scams.

The obvious thing to do was about face and walk away,

but circumstances did not allow her that option. With her teeth clenched, she pushed down the resentment that was bubbling up from within and drew a folded piece of paper out of an inner pocket. Unfolding the paper revealed a few lines of neatly written text, its meticulously formed characters a reflection of the writer's own personality. Its contents contained an address that pointed the reader to a location within Kukrika, and it also specified the name of a store:

Parlor of Fortunes, Lux Infinitus.

For a name, it was on the ostentatious side. If the explanation she heard beforehand was to be believed, however, its function was far more mundane. It was supposed to be a simple fortune-telling place marketed to ladies. She looked at the name inscribed on the paper. Then the sign on the store. Then the paper. Then the store again. Finally, she sighed. There was no denying it. This was exactly where she was instructed to be.

She folded the paper and put it back into her pocket. The door was wide open, beckoning her to enter. Standing at its entrance, she peered in. Unfortunately, the store seemed intent on remaining consistent in its somber design, and the bright daylight made it nearly impossible to make out any details in the darkness inside.

Shion folded her arms and frowned. She was not familiar with this kind of thing, and the atmosphere in the store was not making it any easier to set foot inside by herself. On top of that, the person who made her come here was nowhere to be seen. After a period of contemplation, she struck her palm with her fist and, with the deliberate tone of someone who had made up her mind, said, "Okay, let's go home!"

"How in the world did you manage to arrive at that conclusion?" said someone in an exasperated tone. The voice was familiar.

Shion jumped — quite literally — and lurched forward a few steps before spinning around to the sight of a girl. Her

golden hair fell over a blackish robe that covered her voluptuous figure. The girl stood confidently. Her arms were crossed as well, and this had the effect of emphasizing her already-massive bosom.

The pair of voluminous protrusions, already a good two sizes larger than Shion's, were just short of perfectly round, as they were being pressed against the robe by the arms underneath. Struggling against the confining fabric, they emphatically decried the injustice of their mistreatment. The plight of her breasts, juxtaposed against the maidenly image of the priest robe — the very symbol of chastity — was a feast for the eyes of almost violent proportions.

Even Shion, a fellow girl, could not help but feel her gaze drifting towards them. For male observers, their faces instantly turned beet red as they looked away and desperately pressed their hands to their noses in an attempt to stave off the oncoming tide of bodily fluids. Passersby, mesmerized by the sight, walked blindly into walls and store stalls, knocking over mountains of goods. Panicked onlookers quickly dashed into the shadows of buildings or alleyways. Hell itself broke loose all around her, but the girl in question paid it no mind. She stood staring at Shion, a hint of anger in her eyes.

It made Shion uncomfortable. She tried to say something, but her mind drew a blank. A few moments and a frantic search through her vocabulary later, she managed to piece together a response that she thought was appropriately noncommittal to break the ice.

"H-Hey, Ro, taking the twins for a walk? Man, what're you feeding them to make them grow like that?"

"Silence is golden, you bubbly ignoramus. If you can't think of something to say, just don't say anything."

Ro — Rona, as she is called by others — sighed, and her expression progressed through a rapid sequence of changes that would have been a perfect representation of the five stages of grief had it ended with acceptance instead of

profound resignation. She, shoulders slumped in surrender, was both the one who called Shion here and the reason she could not simply leave.

While their coffers were not exactly bursting, they could afford some luxuries here and there. With the recent drought of adventuring gigs still ongoing, Rona had proposed to Shion that it would be good for the two of them to take a day off and head out for some fun. The thought of a “girls’ day out” carried universal appeal to young ladies in their adolescent years, and Shion was no different. There was, however, a problem, and it was the kind of problem that she did not want to draw attention to. Her atypical upbringing coupled with her timid nature doomed her to be entirely clueless about such topics. Rona was fully aware of this, which was why, being the slightly more informed of the pair, she’d offered to pick their destination. As a result, there they stood.

“...And this is the place you chose?” grumbled Shion, dismay clear on her face.

“What, not good enough for you?” asked a slightly offended Rona.

“I’m no expert, so I can’t say if it’s good or not. Still, doesn’t this place look a little too sketchy?”

Without the slightest unease, Shion began spewing borderline slander about the store while standing right in front of it. Her voice carried to the inside of the store, and Rona immediately sensed that reproachful gazes were being thrown their way. In response, she uncrossed her arms, raised her right hand, and smacked Shion across the head. There was a satisfying sound of impact, and the strike sent Shion lurching forward.

“You know,” said Shion as she rubbed the place she was hit and straightened herself, “I’ve been wondering something for a while. Is it just me or is that not the kind of strike you’d expect from a priest?”

“It’s just you. Now keep your mouth shut for a while,” said

Rona. Then, with her right hand, she pressed her index finger into the bridge of Shion's nose. "What do you mean sketchy? They're operating in broad daylight. These are honest people running an honest business of fortune-telling."

"Fortune-telling's an honest business?"

"If you disagree, then present your evidence, Shion."

Rona withdrew her outstretched arm. She curled both hands into fists and placed them at her hips before puffing out her chest. The gesture caused the features of her chest to be displayed prominently, which in turn had the repeated effect of drawing the attention of all the onlookers. Again, she did not seem bothered.

Meanwhile, a contemplative Shion was trying with limited success to keep her eyes off the pair of protrusions on her friend. It was hard when they were so prominently in view. After a span, she lowered her head in honest conciliation.

"Sorry, I have no evidence."

"Good. Then give the store your heartfelt apologies. But do it in your head so we can get a move on already."

Rona placed her hands on Shion's shoulders and spun her around. Before she could complain, Rona began pushing her inside. While there was no reason to refuse, she felt a natural urge to resist when pushed against her will, and she looked over her shoulder at her friend to voice her dissent.

"You don't have to push—"

"Yes I do! With that attitude of yours, how else are we going to get you to go in?"

For a priest, Rona had strong arms — strong enough, in fact, to overpower Shion — and Shion was under the impression that *she* was the swordsman of the two. She lost the shoving match and was forced through the store's entrance into its murky interior.

The air suddenly felt cool. Despite the wide opening at the front, the store's layout somehow allowed nearly no sunlight to reach the inside. A hazy source of light

functioned as the replacement, providing barely enough illumination to see the ground underfoot and allow for safe walking. The building must have had thick walls, as outside noises were inaudible and a quiet stillness permeated the room. Hovering in the air was the scent of some sort of perfume. Put together, the effect was fairly authentic. If someone had told Shion that this was what mystery looked like, she would have believed it.

Many shelves could be found inside the store, which held various trinkets and charms that gave off a dull, metallic glow in the dim light. Shadowy forms wrapped head to toe in hooded robes drifted to and fro. They were probably the store staff. Thick, heavy curtains separated a number of rooms in the far wall. When customers approached a room, they would gently pull aside the curtain, take a peek in side, and then either enter directly or try a different room.

"You see those curtained rooms? The fortune tellers are inside," whispered Rona, her lips mere inches from Shion's ears.

It tickled a little and Shion jerked away. She would have complained, but the subdued atmosphere inside gave her pause.

"Would you like to give it a try? What kind of fortune do you want told?" asked Rona with a smile. Shion looked at her. Even in the dimly-lit confines of the parlor, Rona could see the blank expression on her friend's face. She let out a deep sigh.

"What's with the sigh?"

"Shion, when I ask you what kind of fortune you want told, I never want to see that dumb look on your face ever again. That was Girls 101, and you just failed."

"I... I failed?"

Taken aback, a disheartened whisper escaped Shion's lips. Rona, however, nodded firmly.

"Yes. You failed spectacularly."

"What was I supposed to do? I don't know the first thing

about any of this," lamented Shion. There was a tremble in her voice, and her fists tightened.

"Don't worry, Shion," said Rona, her voice softening, "I've got you covered. I've done the research already."

"Ro..."

"Every activity, you see, has an established set of practices. A *protocol*, if you will. Whatever you're doing, as long as you follow the protocol, you won't crash and burn. Too badly, anyway." Rona patted herself in the chest confidently, as though telling Shion to leave it to her. They were gentle taps, but even those sent her supple mounds bouncing up and down.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Shion, and she began worrying if Rona was actually wearing undergarments. Her friend's breasts were certainly gorgeous and well-shaped, but they were just so *big*. Was it possible that, unable to find one that fit her size, she had no choice but to go without them? After all, even a light touch made them jiggle so vigorously. Surely, that was the only explanation.

"Uh... Shion?"

"Ro, next time we take a day off, let's go shopping for clothes."

"Huh? Where did that come from?"

"The way they jiggle so much, Ro, I'm seriously worried they might just bounce right out."

"What the heck are you talking about? We're here for fortune-telling, okay?"

Some annoyance crept into Rona's voice before she caught herself and moderated her tone. Nevertheless, her admonishment had the effect of jogging Shion's memory, who vaguely recalled that there was indeed some mention of fortunes before she'd veered off on her wild tangent. Rona's lecture continued as she twirled the index finger of her right hand in a most teacherly fashion.

"Now, do you know what the protocol is for this particular situation? No? Then listen up. As a girl, you are to have your

love life foretold."

"N-No way..."

Shion trembled, dumbstruck by how casually those two words rolled off Rona's tongue. They spoke of matters wholly foreign. Matters, Shion thought, that would also remain foreign to her for no small amount of time. She was yet a budding adventurer, her inexperience written plainly on her face. Currently, she could not even support herself. Work was not bringing in enough money, and she was chewing through her savings. Surely, there was no place for romance in her life when she had yet to figure out how to keep herself fed. Rona, however, seemed to have different ideas.

"You're overthinking this. Lighten up. Just have a go at it."

"B-But..."

"As for me, I'm going to go do some window shopping. Maybe ogle some jewelry. You just go and get your fortune told, okay? Consider it practice. Go on, pick whichever room you like. Oh, and don't worry about paying. I've got that covered," Rona said. She gave Shion a pat on the shoulder and smiled. Shion tried to argue, but before she got a word out, Rona was already browsing the shelves.

Left on her own, Shion found herself at a loss. She had no idea what she was supposed to be practicing, but it felt wrong to dismiss the recommendation of her good friend. After some deliberation, she decided to keep an open mind and give this fortune-telling thing a go. Maybe it wouldn't be that bad. Once she made her decision, she was quick to action. Peering through the dimness at the curtained partitions, she wondered which chamber to choose. In the end, she settled on the one with the blandest curtain. Gently, she parted the cloth and poked her head through the slit.

A mild fragrance hung in the air. The wavering light of a lone candle revealed a table draped in purple cloth, upon which sat a large transparent orb the size of a child's head.

Across the table, gray rag-like cloth covered the short form of a person from head to toe.

“A customer, I presume?”

There was something in the voice that compelled Shion to enter, and so she did. The figure gave a low, throaty chuckle.

“Now what do we have here? An adorable little missus, I see. Come, come, make yourself seated.”

“Uh, sur— Wait, what? Between the two of us, I’m pretty sure you’re the little missus here.”

Though there was some motion to the human-shaped bundle of rags, the figure inside gave no indication of having heard what Shion said, instead fidgeting with the cloth until there was enough of an opening for a small sliver of a face to peer through. She looked Shion in the eyes.

“Welcome to my chamber in the Parlor of Fortunes, my dear little missus. This old maid is happy to receive you...”

“Okay, no. Just, no. There’s no way you’re going to pull off an old maid with a voice like that.”

The voice coming from the bundle of rags was indeed kept very low. Spoken through the cloth, it was also muted and slightly hard to hear. However, at the distance of a mere table apart, it was quite impossible to mistake the voice of a young girl for that of an old lady. Despite Shion’s remark, though, the enshrouded figure seemed intent on sticking to the old lady act and paid it no mind.

“Gazing into the annals of knowledge eternal, I have seen with mine own eyes the great mysteries of the cosmos. What then, little missus, would you have this old maid tell for you today?”

“Okay, I get it. That’s part of this whole routine of yours. I guess it is what it is, but there sure are some heartless parents out there, huh? Making a little girl like you work, I mean. Are they forcing you to do this? If you need any help, just let me know. I’ll do what I can.”

Silence.

Shion was aware that there existed some parents who preyed on the kindness of others. These people would try to draw the sympathy of customers by forcing young children to work. She worried that the tender-voiced fortune teller before her pretending to be an old lady was one such example.

“I’m not trying get your parents in trouble or anything. I’m just saying there are organizations in the Principality of Triden that support young children so they’re not forced to work. If you don’t really want to be doing this, you can talk to me about it, okay?”

As a matter of fact, such support groups were quite common in Triden. It was, perhaps, another reflection of the interests of the higher ups. Being a principality that saw frequent battles with monsters, there was never any shortage of orphaned children or widowed wives. In order to make sure the victims of such misfortune were not forced onto the streets, the Crown poured a generous amount of funding into support groups. As a result, the Principality of Triden saw the least amount of poverty amongst the human kingdoms.

“So, feel free to let me know if you’re—”

“Ah, shut up, you dumbass.”

Shion was cut short by the girl’s frigid remark. Left speechless by the fact that a young girl just called her a dumbass, she watched with her mouth agape as the girl ripped off the veil of rags on her head. A stream of golden hair appeared, flowing smoothly past the rather striking features of her face and down her back. She looked to be about five or six years old, but her gaze was sharp as she glared at Shion.

“Do you even know how fortune-telling works? You gotta *talk*, lady. This job’s all about the delivery. You think you can just grab a kid and force her to do this? Give it a rest with your moral high ground crap.”

“Oh, I— What? Huh? Um, sorry, I guess?”

With chin in hand and elbow on table, the girl launched into a grumbling tirade. Realizing that she had apparently wronged the girl in some way, Shion apologized.





"Well? What's it gonna be, lady? Are you gonna get your fortune told or not?"

"U-Uh, sure. I'll do it." Shion nodded.

After that exchange, it was hard to imagine a less mysterious atmosphere, but seeing as she was the cause of it all, Shion compliantly lowered herself into the chair at the table.

"So, what do you want to know?"

"Um... About my love life, I guess?"

"Huh? Are you frigging serious? Dumb *and* horny. Man, you're a piece of work, lady," said the girl in a tone that suggested she had never heard a stupider question.

A vein bulged in Shion's temple. Even she had her limits, but she forced down the anger, reminding herself that she was dealing with a little girl.

"Whatever. Hey, lady, put your hand on that crystal ball."

Shion could almost taste the boredom in the girl's voice, but she complied and placed her hand on the crystal ball at the center of the table. The girl stared at it for a while.

Nothing happened. Then, the girl simply looked back at her.

"Looks like you haven't met your soul mate yet. He's probably gonna show up soon, though. The forest's your lucky place, but it's also where you'll run into trouble. But, I mean, what're you gonna do? That's fate, right? If worse comes to worst, you're gonna get beaten up and violated before getting dragged away for your underground debut. It's all in the timing. With that said, though, it might not be smooth sailing for you down the road even if things do work out."

"That sounds pretty bad..."

"Also, watch out for the busty blonde. Don't let her snatch your prize."

"Hm?"

"And against the breastless blonde, win the spec war. As for the rest, don't lose on characterization."

"It's... a little weird how that's so specific and yet so

vague.”

“As they say, doubt my words at your own peril.”

With a “hah!” the girl proudly thrust out her chest. Its smooth contour betrayed the smug look on her face.

“I thought that fortune-tellers had... I don’t know, a different manner of speech. More mysterious, maybe.”

Something about what she just witnessed felt a little too different from what she was expecting. Her opinion seemed to irritate the girl slightly, who struck back.

“Lady, I can throw all sorts of big, mysterious words at you, but are you gonna understand?”

“Can I snap now? I feel like I should be allowed to snap now... A-Anyway,” said Shion as she suppressed her anger and changed the topic, “p-putting that aside, about the soul mate thing... Do you mean that’s someone who I’ll spend the rest of my life with?”

“Oh? What, is that turning you on? Looks like someone’s in heat.”

The comment caused a vein to throb angrily over Shion’s furrowed brows, but the girl could not seem to care less. She propped up her chin on the table with her elbow and smirked. There was a jarring maturity to that smirk that belied her childlike appearance. Shion felt a chill at the contrast and pulled back a little.

“Should you cross paths with your true love, you will surely experience one fantastic adventure after another. Magical tales with fairies abound, epic myths woven by gods, and lores and legends sung by devils, all these comedies and tragedies — these stories that enrapture the heart of man — shall be yours to see. And you’ll get front row seats, too, with that person at your side.”

“Wow, that sure sounds like a breathtaking series of adventures.”

“Breathtaking series of adventures, huh. Lemme remind you that reading about it isn’t the same as living it. If you want out, now’s your chance. Speak up or forever hold your

silence. Decision time, lady. What'll it be?"

The girl spoke eloquently as if in song. Despite the fact that there was a strange verisimilitude to her words, Shion pushed herself forward onto the table and looked the girl in the eyes before answering. She was not sure why, but something in her told her that she could not back down here.

"If that is true, it would be a waste to pass up the chance to experience a life far beyond what's possible for a mere mortal. I shall humbly accept what comes."

Seeing that Shion rose to the challenge, the girl fixed her with a measuring glance.

"Even if you might die?" asked the girl again as if testing her opponent. Shion lips curled upwards at the question.

"I was prepared to die the day I became an adventurer," she answered. There was no fear or doubt in her voice.

"So be it... Dauntless adventurer, allow me to welcome your participation."

The girl sat back and leaned into her chair. She spread her arms wide, as though she were beckoning Shion to come.

"Here and now, the choice has been made. Now, then... Please enjoy."

A clap echoed.

With a gasp, Shion realized she was standing in the middle of the fortune-telling parlor. She had a vague feeling that she was talking to someone just a moment ago, but the strange hazy feeling in her head kept her memories out of reach. Absently, she looked at the far wall. Nothing was there except for an empty patch that felt oddly out of place.

"Shion? Did you get your fortune told already?"

Turning to the direction of the voice, she found a curious Rona looking back at her, various jewelry in and hanging off her hands.

"Uh, hmm... Fortune... right, fortune-telling."

"Are you okay? I don't think they're burning any weird

incenses here, but every so often there'll be someone who gets overwhelmed by the atmosphere. Do you feel sick?"

"I'm fine. I'm... fine." Shion smiled in an attempt to calm her worried friend.

"Are you sure? Should we take a few more days off? I mean, technically, we did agree to investigate the Miasmal Forest as our next mission from the guild... and they'll probably fine us if we cancel now."

"No, it's fine. Forest... We're investigating a forest, huh. Sounds good. I'm up for it. Don't worry."

Something stirred in the back of her mind, but she could not put her finger on it. It was not an ominous or unpleasant feeling. If anything, it felt almost like a sign of good things to come. Shion put out her hand and patted a concerned Rona on the shoulder to reassure her.

"It'd be a waste to cancel the mission and pay a fine. Once the vacation's over, let's head back to work."

"Really... Well, if you say so. On that note, so, I was looking at this amulet, right?"

After presumably deciding that everything was okay, Rona lightened up and began recommending the heap of jewelry she held in her hands. While Shion had no interest in accessorizing, on her friend's suggestion, she picked up a few trinkets and tried them on.

As the hours rolled by, the two girls cheerfully enjoyed the rest of their day off.

There is a story. It happened somewhere not here, and sometime not now. This is that story.

"Man, I put in so much damn work there! I worked *hard!*. I worked so hard I could have raised myself out of systemic poverty! But damn that was close. I just barely managed to make the pieces fit together!"

“Master... I believe this is what most would refer to as ‘dropping the ba—’”

“No! This is not! This is called setting the stage!”

“Okay... But you have yet to select the candidate, right? Is there any guarantee that the one you send will be male?”

“Wha— U-Um... if it’s a girl, then we’ll just keep it platonic.”

“I see... Well, try your best at finding someone to cross the boundary, then. I will be rooting for you.”

“Hweh?! You’re not gonna help?”

Somewhere, sometime, there might or might not have been a conversation like so.

There is a story about the princess of a certain kingdom. About her meeting with a visitor from another world. And about how their escapades led to them barging straight into an epic battle that drew in the hero, the demon lord, and even the gods high above.

This is not that story.

This story... happened just a little bit before.

A few days later, the two of them would go on to form a party with six other men and investigate the Miasmal Forest.

Afterword

This is a story of the happenings on a certain night.

The red letters signifying a new message popped up in my inbox. Was it a typo report? A reader comment? Or, oh god, maybe a warning from the admins? Was the story I wrote that dangerous?! Terrified, I opened my message box, only to find an odd message from the admins. The gist of it was that there were some weirdos out there who wanted to turn my work into print, and if I was interested, I should get in touch with them.

Could this be the rumored “publication offer” I’d heard so much about? No way. I thought that was an urban myth.

At some point, I replied to that sudden message I received, and before I knew it, the book was in stores and people were calling me “sensei.” It was the stuff of legends.

Countless writers had dreamed of seeing such a message in their inbox, only to fade into obscurity as they chased after a pie in the sky. I thought the whole point was to give young aspiring novelists a sliver of hope and raise their expectations, only to drop them back down afterwards. It was meant to be a trap, right? A tried-and-true and highly efficient trap? Was I wrong?

Such thoughts were *not* racing through my head as I penned my response. I merely read the message like any normal person would and replied as instructed. And now we’re here.

Then again, even as I’m writing this, I technically haven’t seen the finished product yet, so there’s still a slim but non-zero possibility that this could all be some epic trolling. Maybe this is all staged.

Where’re the cameras?! Where’d you hide the mics?! Is

someone eventually going to show up holding a big “FOOLED YA” sign?

Man was not made to live seriously all the time. There is a need to throw a few gags in at times. I think some famous person said that at some point.

That aside, firstly, let me thank you for reading this book. I would also like to express my deep gratitude for those who purchased it. Thank you very much. For those who haven’t, I’d really appreciate it if you just held onto it until you head to the cash register. I’ll cry tears of joy if you do that.

All right, now, I’d like to say hi to those who are reading this for the first time. If it’s not your first time, well, hi anyway. I’m Mine, the author of this book. Pleased to make your acquaintance. This work, which was originally serialized on the novel uploading site, “Shosetsuka ni Naro,” has been published in print thanks to Hobby Japan. I’m so thankful that I can’t go to sleep with my feet facing them.

Hobby Japan’s probably south of where I am, so I’d have to have my pillow on the north side of the bed. That’s probably not going to happen, so I’m good to go. These days, not a whole lot of people seem to care, but pillows to the north is supposed to bring bad luck. Be careful, everyone.

Normally, there’d be a short explanation about the work here, but I’m going to purposefully not mention anything. I ask that you just go and give the book a read. What’s written there comprises the contents of this work. Rather than the author rambling on about how this part was actually like this, it’s better for people to simply read it and form their own opinions. I’m sure of it.

Personally, I’ll be happy if this story is even the slightest bit of fun to read. To know that I brought the slightest smile

to a reader's face. Nothing would make me happier. And for that to keep happening, I intend to keep writing.

Man was not made to live seriously all the time. There is a need to throw a few gags in at times. I think some famous person probably did not say that at some point. Still, it's necessary to be a little more serious at times. Balance is important in everything.

Let's wrap this up, then.

To Hobby Japan's editors, as well as all the proofreaders, sales people, and designers. To Kabocha, who blessed this work with wonderful illustrations. To K, the project manager, who first came to me with the offer, and then stuck with me through the whole process until the final publication.

Allow me to not crack some cheap joke in an attempt to avoid being all serious and saying thank you, and actually say thank you. You have my deepest gratitude.

It was thanks to all of you that this book saw the light of day. Your efforts made all the difference. I have no idea if or when I can repay you, but I'll try to keep getting better until I can. As for when that happens, only God knows.

One last thing. To my readers.

To those of you who read this work on "Shosetsuka ni Naro," as well as those of you who posted comments and pointed out any typos, and finally, also all of those who took this book in their hands, I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Mine

Bonus In-Store Exclusives

Toranoana Special Short Story

There is a saying: God does not play dice.

While I am aware that those words originated from a fairly famous being of a certain parallel world, I can't help but smile wryly at their every mention. God is overrated.

That is, I am overrated.

This saying is based upon the view that nothing in the world is random — a view that I absolutely do not subscribe to. Supporters of this view go around espousing the idea that all phenomena are deterministic, and our inability to see their intrinsic determinism is due to the limited nature of our own existence as observers who cannot measure, or indeed, comprehend some crucial factor of the universe. This factor, or perhaps system of factors, govern the most fundamental workings of all existence, but its secrets are privy only to those possessed of infinite wisdom, a being of utmost omnipotence — God herself.

If I could be allowed to say one thing to them, it would be this: people, please stop invoking my name for everything and throwing all your problems to me.

After all, I play dice, too. Look, I'm rolling some right now.

"Master, I think you should stop using dice to determine the factors used for the worlds you create."

So said the angel I'd brought with me for record-keeping. I glared at her. The effect was underwhelming, considering

my appearance was still that of the young girl, which I had used when I talked someone into crossing a world boundary for me a little while ago. Nevertheless, it was intimidating enough for the angel's face to visibly pale.

"Geez, chill. I don't bite."

With a sigh, I rolled the dice in my hand again. They were dice of many, many sides — so many that at a glance, they looked like simple spheres. In fact, even I couldn't remember just how many sides they had. After they left my hand, they continued spinning for some time until finally coming to a rest.

"It appears to be another world of sword and sorcery, Master. Are you sure you did not rig the dice?"

I shook my head, equally baffled by the skewed results.

As a matter of fact, so many things baffle me that sometimes I wonder if I'm maybe not actually the being people commonly refer to as "God." Maybe I'm something else entirely. It'd be nice if that were true, actually. It'd make things a lot easier for me.

"Run a simulation with the results of the last roll."

"Cases 1 through 1305 collapse at the order of 32 billion with a margin of error of 0.001%. Cases 1306 and beyond do not even reach the order of 16 billion. Only case 2705 continues to persist at the order of 35 billion."

"Begin world creation with only case 2705. Destroy the rest after logging the data."

The data I'd acquired after endless iterations of dice rolls was almost entirely useless. That was a bitter pill to swallow. The sheer harshness of reality made me bury my face in my hands. It wasn't completely fruitless, though; there was one. At least there was that. It was a comforting thought, and clinging onto it made me feel a little better.

Then, the angel rained on my meager little parade, perhaps as payback for earlier.

“Master, the rate of creation is not keeping up with the rate of collapse.”

To me, worlds are like cells, and like cells, they go through a cycle of creation and collapse. When the rate of collapse is faster, maintaining the whole system becomes impossible. To use the same analogy, I could continuously produce cells with short lifespans. But that would be the equivalent of having a chronic disease — a far cry from good health.

“Continue as directed.”

I watched the angel wordlessly lower her head. Then, in a fit of something — stubbornness or desperation, I didn’t know — I started rolling the dice again

Maybe, just maybe, one of these days I’ll produce the perfect world, or at least a near-perfect one.

...God, I swear, if anyone wants to trade jobs with me, I’d do it in a heartbeat.

So went another average day in my life.

Standard Bookstore Short Story

Sunlight streamed in through the window and onto the bed, rousing Rona from her slumber. She opened her eyes.

A trained knight, Rona was very much a morning person. In comparison, her dear friend Shion, whom she both loved and respected, was *not* a morning person. In fact, Shion was so bad with mornings that Rona worried about her hurting herself by accident sometimes.

Rona sat up in bed, clothed in a loose-fitting nightgown. The motion caused the two prominences on her chest to sway a little.

She looked at them.

Not long ago, she had firmly believed that a quick jiggle

of those would bring any man to his knees. Now she knew better; some people were immune. That knowledge, however, came at the cost of some of her confidence. She figured that it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. In a way, it was proof that that person was trustworthy.

It had still dented her pride, though.

Further brooding seemed liable to do nothing but make her depressed, so she shook those thoughts from her head and changed into her priest robe to head out.

When she arrived at the inn's dining hall, she found that Renya and Shion were already having breakfast. Rather, Renya was having breakfast, alternating between grimaces and scowls as he battled with the stiff, black bread. Meanwhile, Shion was snoozing happily with her face planted firmly in her own share. Rona thought it rather unbecoming of a nice young maiden in her prime, but it wasn't exactly an uncommon occurrence. If anything, there was a comforting familiarity to the sight.

After confirming with Renya that they had no particular plans that day, Rona headed out into the city. A number of figures quickly approached her. They were all secret agents who, normally, would be on various other missions. Exchanging information with them through signals and memos was a crucial process in ensuring Shion's safety. It was an important job that Rona took seriously, and she tried — with limited success — to maintain some semblance of regularity in the frequency of these meetings.

A quick lunch came next, followed by another round of exchanges with secret agents in the afternoon. This time, it was with people sent by various sources such as nobles or the guild. At times, she felt a strong urge to tell them all to bugger off. Nevertheless, she diligently continued her work, reminding herself to accept the fact that reality did not allow for such an outburst.

By the time her work was done, the sky had already taken on an orange hue as the sun neared the horizon. Willing her tired body to keep moving, she made her way back to the inn, where she was greeted with a warm welcome from Shion. That alone made her steps feel lighter. In the dining hall, Renya — whether through intent or simple coincidence, she wasn't sure — also seemed to be waiting for her. The sight of him waving at her brought a resigned smile to her lips.

The menu for the evening consisted of bread and rather meaty stew, along with grilled meat and some salted leafy greens. Rona, being quite partial to meat, was very pleased with the lineup — but it apparently failed to satisfy Renya, who had been whispering a steady string of grumbling complaints. He probably meant to keep it to himself, and maybe he was quiet enough for Shion, but Rona heard him loud and clear. His complaints, however, turned out to be valid criticism instead of mindless slander, so she chose to let him grumble to his heart's content.

Upon finishing dinner, she headed to the inn's bathhouse, not forgetting to tease Renya with an invitation to join her in her room afterwards. Once she washed herself, she changed into her nightgown. Unless there were plans to enjoy the town's nightlife, sundown signaled the conclusion of her day. With much of her work taking place during the day and little for her to do in the evening, turning in early was often the prudent choice. She put out the light and climbed into bed, then reflected on the events of the day.

It was truly an ordinary day. An ordinary, peaceful day. She prayed that such days would continue, but little did she know that her prayer was not only not heard, but would soon be turned on its head.

Melon Books Special Column

Thank you very much for picking up the first volume of [New Life+] Young Again in Another World. I received a request from Melonbooks to write something about this series. After mulling over what that “something” might be, I responded with the idea that I would write a few short blurbs about the main characters, and so it was settled.

First up, Renya Kunugi, the indisputable protagonist of this series.

Renya was a dangerous man — so dangerous that back in his original world, if there were a Guinness Book of World Records entry for “Most Kills,” it would almost certainly have listed his name. Despite that, after leaving his mark in the fields of swordsmanship and art, he lived a long life and passed away peacefully of old age.

Oh wait, if we’re talking about kill counts in terms of our world here, I guess he’d still lose to a certain bearer of a certain Knight’s Cross. Of course, that guy flew a dive bomber.

I designed his character to have not only enjoyed a long life, but also to be fairly overpowered. There is a reason for this. When I first started writing this series, many of the alternate world stories on the “Syousetsuka ni Narou” website began by having the protagonist getting hit by a dump truck, dying of some disease, jumping off a building, and such; they were all deaths that came suddenly. The protagonist would then go on to receive ridiculously broken abilities. Seeing this, I racked my brain trying to figure out a different character and a different way to start the story. Renya was born as a result of those mental struggles.

On that note, I pulled the name “Renya” out of a hat and went with it mostly because it sounded cool. I was originally going to name him “Main” (マイン). That’s “ma-in,” pronounced similarly to the English word “mine.” However, due to the fact that my alias is also ma-in (マイൻ), I had to change it. That’s how I eventually settled on its current form.

Up next has to be heroine number 1, Shion Femme-Fatale. Ponytail with traditional Japanese(-like) clothes. Totally my thing. Yep, this character was designed entirely on the author's whims.

At first, she was supposed to be a swordsman with the whole aura of an honorable warrior about her and everything, but over the course of writing this story, she seems to have turned into an oddball character who's a few cards short of a deck. Out of all the heroines in this series, she's the most deserving of the phrase, "How? How did this happen?"

Both her name and her appearance came rather easily to me. Before I began uploading my works to the site, I had been writing novels on my own homepage. The heroines in those stories had always been Shion, and she had always sported a black ponytail. Honestly, out of all the characters in this series, she was the easiest one to come up with.

By the way, her last name, "Femme-Fatale," is supposed to mean "fated woman" in French (I think)? Of course, it also has connotations of being wicked or enchanting...

Seriously, what the heck happened to this girl? I swear she was cooler when I started writing— Erm, never mind. Pretend you didn't read that.

She's a troublemaker with a cute side that you'll glimpse at times. If you stretch the definition of "enchanting" a little, I'm sure it fits her, too. Right?

Lastly, we have heroine number two, Rona Chevalier.

Long blond hair and a dynamite body. Tried and true, right? She's a priest, and she's got no qualms about using her charms to her advantage. She's also been trained as a knight, so she's no pushover. Normally, you'd think she's a downright winner at life, gifted with both looks and talent, but her luck ran out the day she was assigned to guard Shion. Had she kept quiet and remained a knight, a

perfectly competent person like her probably would have quickly climbed the social ladder. Instead, she is now relegated to the role of eyeball magnet, wearing clothes a size too small for her and hanging around Shion to attract people's attention. Life has certainly given her lemons, but she takes it in stride. She treasures her master, Shion, and works diligently to further her interests.

Appearance-wise, she's the very archetype of a Big Sis character. Her last name is pretty straightforward: Chevalier is French for knight. She's also got a scheming side, and she's probably way more of an enchantress than Shion. But in this series, she falls firmly in the zone of "a normal person who's competent."

Since this is the first time, I've focused on the main characters and given my thoughts as the author. Whether or not there'll be a second time is up to God. And, I suppose, the good graces of you, the readers. May you continue to favor [New Life+] with your time.

I hope there'll be a volume two. If there is, let us meet again.

Yours truly,
Mine



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by Mine

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